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Freaking Out, Fitting In, And Finding My Way: Looking Back on Four Months in China

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*Freaking Out, Fitting In, and Finding My
Way: Looking Back on Four Months in
China*

A Thesis

The Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Distinction "All College Honors"
And the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
In the Department of English

By
Katie Neunsinger
May 2000

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Project Title: "Freaking Out, Fitting In, and Finding My Way:
Looking Back on Four Months in China"

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Introduction

During the fall of my junior year of college I was part of a study abroad group from the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University comprised of two professors, their two children, and twenty-seven students. During the first ten days of our four and a half month stay in China, we traveled to some of the major tourist attractions of the Middle Kingdom, including the Great Wall of China, Tiananmen Square, and the army of Terracotta soldiers in Xi'an. We stayed in hotels akin to the Holiday Inn and ate at restaurants very few Chinese could have afforded. Our buses were air-conditioned, and indeed, I felt that I was seeing China from above, out the bus window and through the tinted glass. What I wanted more than anything was to be up to my elbows in this new country.

We settled in at Southwest China Normal University (Xi Shi) in Beibei, Chongqing around the fourteenth of September 1998. Xi Shi is a teacher's college of about 11,000 students. Beibei is one of many districts of the municipality of Chongqing, the largest city in China and, by some counts, the world. "Chongqing" refers both to the city proper and to the entire municipality, which recently gained economic independence from Sichuan, the province that surrounds it. Getting to Beibei was the beginning of my "China experience." It is where I established friendships and some semblance of a normal life. It is where I began to feel at home in China.

I set out to tell the story of my four and a half months as a student abroad in China. I wanted to explain to my family and friends, who thought I was crazy for going there in the first place and then thought I was a nostalgic wreck when I got back, why going there and, upon my repatriation, feeling the wrenching pain of nostalgia, were understandable. I wanted to be the writer who explained China without proclaiming that no matter how much I told you, you would still have to go there for yourself to really get it. I wanted to paint as vivid a picture as the artists shaping watercolor mountains on rice paper. Ultimately I wanted to make China real for people who might never go there. And maybe I wanted to convince them that this is a place they might want to go to someday.

I spent the first four months of my writing steeped in exquisitely rich memories. Sitting at a brand new Compaq computer on a padded chair on wheels in an overheated computer lab full of clacking keys, all I had to do was close my eyes and breathe more deeply and I was eating hotpot, tromping through the cold, rainy streets of Kunming looking for a place to change money, exchanging bits of slang with my Chinese friends, and sitting at the base of a bridge in a small village on a foggy night trying to figure out what had brought me there. I couldn't write as fast as the sensations hit me.

I had fun with the descriptions and storytelling, but I wanted my essays to do more than tell a story. Besides making China real to my readers, I wanted to make it normal. I wanted to make it normal, full, and round. When I say I went to China I often hear, "Oh, my God! I can't believe you went there! I could never go there! That's so far away and so completely different from here. Don't they eat with chopsticks there?" Yes, and they speak Chinese and write their language in characters. They play *ma jiang* at

tables that line the streets and avoid Western-style toilets. They pirate American movies and music. But the sensational wasn't what made my time there extraordinary. It was the extraordinary becoming ordinary. It was making and maintaining friendships with Chinese women my age. It was knowing what was around the corner and how much a pound of oranges costs. It was being comfortable in a place where I had always assumed I could never be comfortable. When I got back to the United States a friend of mine who had studied in France that semester talked about the friendships we had formed and the people we had met while abroad. "Isn't it amazing that there are people who love us on the other side of the world?" she said.

Those were the stories I wanted to tell—the stories about everyday lunches and baking banana bread, about shopping and walking and roller-skating. The Great Wall of China, while awesome and fascinating, did not affect me nearly as much as saying goodbye to my friends did. The Terracotta Soldiers weren't as memorable as the slang Chinese college students use. I felt as if I were wandering and drifting through China until I actually met Chinese people. I didn't stop feeling like a tourist until I had established something of a routine and knew my way around Beibei. My Chinese life didn't become meaningful until I started thinking of it as a life rather than as a visit. That was also when it became difficult. When I could be frustrated with myself and my own ignorance rather than with things not going the way I wanted them to go, when I became a participant rather than an observer, when I realized that saying goodbye to my Chinese friends would be far more difficult than saying goodbye to my mother had been, I knew that my time in China had been more than a vacation. Those moments are far more interesting and meaningful. I'm not writing these essays to regale my friends with stories

of the shockingly oppressive social conditions and the sub-FDA eating habits of the Chinese.

Finding that out was the other part of this great and winding journey of a thesis project. What started as a public offering to describe China to people who have chosen other paths has become intensely personal. Before you I have laid some of the most confusing, most heartbreaking, most touching, and most joyous moments of my life. Thirteen months after returning from China I'm still trying to make sense of what happened to me there. What I dreaded most was coming back to the United States and relegating my experience to photo albums and the occasional first date when some stranger would ask if and how they celebrated Christmas in China. If the time I spent in China was anything more than a long vacation it would necessarily permeate more parts of my life than my memory. It has entered my lifestyle (I taught my roommates how to play *ma jiang* and make them speak a few simple Chinese phrases); my decorating (My walls are covered with batiks from Yunnan province, and a pair of tiny red shoes sits on my bookcase); my social life (My friendships with some of the people who shared this semester in China with me have grown deeper, are more genuine, and consist of more than simple reminiscences and shallow pinings for that country); and my psyche (My post-graduation plans are not nearly as clear as they might have been had I not developed this new, complicated way of looking at the world). These essays are a way of exploring how China has entered, taken hold of, and transformed my psyche and worldview.

I've had a hard time resolving the ugly images of China I had grown up with and the China I saw when I went there. When I came home people asked me "How was China?" and I answered "Great! Fabulous! Amazing!" I said that I had had a wonderful

time and that I couldn't wait to go back. Occasionally someone would ask me what I thought of the political situation there, or why I loved China, since all most Americans really know about it was the ugly side—the human rights violations, the nuclear weapons threats, the bullying of Taiwan. It was a question that had lingered in the back of my head the entire time I was in China and during every conversation I had about China upon my return. It was a question I didn't really want to think about because I knew it didn't have a simple answer. I preferred to savor the experience and leave the analysis to someone else. When I felt pushed to answer the more probing questions, I settled on loving the people and hating the government. It's a common stance for Westerners to take on China; vilifying the government for victimizing the people is helpful for getting past the nasty obstacle of reality.

It's too simple, though. The "love the people-hate the government" attitude returns the most well-meaning of world travelers to stereotypes based on ignorance. It makes both the government and the people flat and static. Romanticizing the Chinese does nothing to help the Chinese. The Chinese are not passive in their attitudes toward Tibet, nor were many passive during the Cultural Revolution; the government could not function without some sort of complicity from the people. On the other hand, there has been some serious manipulation and heavy-handedness on the part of the government that most Chinese would probably consider uncalled-for. My task has been to find a balance between loving China and the Chinese people and understanding that a line cannot be drawn between the Chinese government and the Chinese people. I can't hate one absolutely while loving the other absolutely.

My task has also been to explore what right I have to love or to hate or to be indifferent to China. Whether or not I approve of that country's Tibet policy or of its attitudes toward the United States is inconsequential to nearly everyone in China. It does matter to me, however, and perhaps to anyone else trying to understand China. Maybe for my own peace of mind or for the sake of people who ask me what I think of this or that condition in China and expect an intelligent answer, I have had to think about and come to tentative conclusions.

These conclusions not only concern China and the Chinese, but also us Westerners who call ourselves backpackers, students, China-watchers, and guests in China. I knew when I was in China that there was a certain kind of tourist who irritated me, and there was a certain way of traveling in China that I thought was acceptable. I'm not sure now that it's the way tourists travel so much as the mentality they carry with them when they travel. I have struggled with giving an honest picture of myself, trying not to pretend to have been an ideal traveler who never made cultural *faux pas* and who was always cheerful and receptive to every possible new experience. I have also struggled with not turning some of the travelers I met along the way into caricatures of self-absorbed Westerners unconcerned with the people they were meeting or the impression they were making.

Finally, I have struggled with the idea that by writing these essays, some might think that I am putting myself forward as an expert on China. My great disclaimer for this collection is that I am not an expert on China. I was there for four and a half months, and I only visited a handful of locations. I feel as if I did a lot there, but I don't want to presume to know or understand much about Chinese history, culture, or psychology. I

am an expert about my own feelings and impressions; the rest I have gleaned and synthesized from coursework and reading, including Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*, Paul Theroux's *Riding the Iron Rooster*, and Lee Feigon's *Demystifying Tibet*.

China is very trendy right now, as the world stands on the brink of the "Pacific Century." Bookstores are teeming with how-to guides on *feng shui*, the Taoist art of arranging rooms and homes so that *qi*—the energy of the universe—flows to your advantage. Express and the Gap sell T-shirts stitched, sewn and embossed with the characters for peace, love, and joy. St. Cloud, the large town near my college, now boasts ten Chinese restaurants of various degrees of authenticity. China, in some way, shape, or form, is mentioned in nearly every edition of every national news magazine and newspaper. Yet somehow I get the sense that most of these additions to the landscape of American retail romanticize or, much worse, demonize China. I do not want to add my voice or my experience to this growing body of pop culture's version of China. I want to add it to the quieter but more interesting body of literature that doesn't serve to build China into something we want or fear or expect it to be: by turns a country of backward farmers who gawk at Westerners and spit all the time; an overcrowded piece of geography that holds one fifth of the world's population starving and suffering under the hands of cruel dictators; a cruel dictatorship that tortures its weak people and tries to influence American presidential elections and that will use a nuclear bomb indiscriminately if given a chance; the seat of Taoism, a nurturer of Buddhism, the birthplace of Confucian thought and society and in many other ways "Ancient China;" and altogether a stock character on the world stage of nations. I think our picture of it as "Ancient China" has led to its being romanticized by so many Westerners. It can seem

like a place removed from what we consider mainstream culture and therefore the perfect place to remove oneself to in order to find oneself and straighten out the complicated messes of fast-paced Western life. China can be a picturesque backdrop to the resolution of inner conflicts and other disenchantments.

I don't think that everyone—or even nearly everyone—who goes to China goes with the “find yourself” attitude. I choose to believe that the people who try to immerse themselves in the culture and try to shed their spectator role stand a good chance of undergoing a transformation. That is, travelers, students, teachers or other foreigners who let go of romantic and exotic notions of China are more likely to get beyond pop culture images of China. To them I offer this collection of essays in the hopes that it will resonate with their own experiences. To my readers who have never been to China, I offer this piece of myself less as an inducement to travel to China than as a counterpoint to the flat images of China that have flooded the American market, imagination, and political scene.

On the Value of Trains

After spending a week in Dali, a backpacker hotspot in Yunnan province, Sarah Mechtenberg and I arrived in Kunming on New Years Day. I spent the six-hour bus ride trying to nap and replaying the scene from the night before. Sarah and I had hung out at the Old Wooden House Café in Dali with the proprietors, some Chinese diners, a Japanese traveler who had studied at the University of Minnesota and had taken classes with Sarah's cousin, a lonely French woman, and Ah Ping, a middle school dropout who had adopted us during our six day stay in Dali. Mostly he had just wanted to sell us horse and buggy rides and get us to buy him lunch, but we managed to slip in a game of Uno and to make use of his savvy bargaining skills. I made him *tiao wu*—dance—with me, to the delight of the locals, and we all played spoons and *ma jiang*. At midnight we wished each other *xin nian kuai le*—Happy New Year—and sang “Happiness Forever,” as the Chinese translate “Auld Lang Syne.” The Europeans down the street at Café de Jack were setting off firecrackers to usher in 1999, and the popping sounds followed us home to Jim's Peace Café and Guesthouse.

By the time we paid for one night in our Kunming hotel and ate a light dinner, I was down to 60 yuan, which amounted to about five dollars and fifty cents US. The next morning I took my first shower in three days and then went to a Western-style café for breakfast with Sarah. The walls were graffittied with messages from Western travelers,

including a few messages from previous years' China study abroad groups from our school. Sarah went to find a park she had read about in the *Lonely Planet*, and I went in search of some money.

It was rainy and exceptionally cold for Kunming, which is in the southern part of China, in Yunnan Province, an area that sees relatively warm weather all year round. It snowed in Kunming later that day for the first time in years. Traffic stopped, and people yelled in the streets. But I didn't know any of that when I got dressed that morning; and, assuming that it would be another temperate day in Yunnan, I wore my Birkenstocks, a pair of thin pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt. I wasn't quite sure where to go for money, but I assumed the Bank of China would be the best place. I had done all my money changing at the Bank of China office in downtown Beibei. There are several state banks in China, including the Agricultural Bank of China, the China Construction Bank and the Industrial Bank of China. Only *the* Bank of China, however, changed foreign currency into yuan.

I pulled out my *Lonely Planet* guidebook and tried to follow the map. The bank should have been only two or three blocks from my hotel, but I think they either moved the building or the *Lonely Planet* was wrong. In any event, I walked for forty-five minutes in the rain, sloshing my sandaled feet through puddles and nearly running into a *ma jiang* table. I stopped a police officer on the street and tried, in my best stumbling Chinese, to ask for the bank, using the Chinese word that I had just memorized; in Beibei I never needed to ask where the bank was because I knew. The police officer pointed me back to a street I had just passed. When I got there and tried to turn, I discovered that the road forked, and I hadn't the slightest idea which fork to take. The rain was gathering

strength and my nose was starting to run. Soon my eyes followed suit and I found myself crying.

I found yet another police officer and asked him how to get to the Bank of China. He told me to walk sixty meters and take a right and then he walked away. Being an American, I had little idea of how to judge a meter, and so I walked blindly until finally I just picked a road and turned right.

Ten minutes later, with toes soaked to the bone and a heart longing for my mom's red Toyota and the Northwoods Bank of Minnesota, I found the Bank of China. I felt as if I had found the Potala or Mecca, or the Vatican or heaven. Thinking I was home free, I stepped into the smaller-than-usual office and marched to the nearest counter. "*Ni hao*," I said, slipping back and forth between Chinese and English. "I want to change money."

The clerk, obviously bored with her work, looked up from her knitting long enough to send me to a different window. The next clerk began to describe the exchange rate: "Okay, rate is 807 for \$100." I should have realized that something was not right: that was the cash exchange rate. Travelers checks, which I had, got 826 for \$100. Too wrapped up in my numb toes to notice this discrepancy, I pulled my travelers checks and passport out of my passport pouch. "No checks! American cash only! This is a branch office."

Taken aback, I responded, "I don't have cash. Where is the main office?" I dreaded searching out yet another bank with vague directions and waning energy.

"It is closed today." Her English got better with every bit of bad news.

"But if I can't cash checks I have no money."

"Then you have no money," she responded and turned to walk away.

“Wait—could I use a credit card?” I pulled out my Visa and hoped for a miracle. The clerk looked at me and looked at my card and went back into an office, presumably to ask her boss about their Visa policy.

When she returned, she cleared her throat, looked me straight in the eye, and said “You can get money from your credit card—” I felt a ray of hope and light pass across my face—“but not here.”

If someone told me this story I probably wouldn’t believe it, but it really happened, and she really did tell me then you have no money and there really was that pause before she said “but not here.” My shoulders slumped as I turned away from the dusty counter with the rusty steel bars. The only bit of help this woman could give me was directions to a hotel a few blocks away that changed the checks of travelers—even the ones who didn’t have rooms there.

I stepped back out into the rainy Kunming morning. In my chilled misery I replayed the previous two weeks of travel through Tibet and the southwest of China. There was the altitude sickness, cold and shortness of breath in Tibet. I’d spent Christmas Eve on a stinky, noisy, crowded Chinese train and followed it with a nine hour bus ride the next day on bad roads in even more cramped conditions. The Number Four Guesthouse in Dali, where Sarah and I decided to stay cheap, didn’t even have toilets in the same building as our room, but did have for us four stoned roommates who came home in the middle of the night smelling of the locally grown marijuana.

By the time I found the hotel the bank clerk had directed me to—her directions proved to be wonderfully accurate and clear—I was worked up into such a state of homesickness and I-want-my-mom-ness that all I wanted was to step off the sidewalk and

into America. I wanted it to be that easy. I didn't want to wait the twelve days I had left before Northwest would take me away. I wanted my easy life back.

I thought back to a trip my entire study abroad group had taken in November to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province. We spent a night on the way home in the village of Huanglongxi, whose main attraction for American tourists was a night watchman who hourly walked through the town ringing a gong to alert people to the changing hour. As night fell in "the small village," as we liked to call it, I went for a walk with co-travelers Sarah, John, and Carol. We walked into the old part of town—the part that still had its pre-Cultural Revolution wooden doors and four inch doorsills—and around to the teahouse near the river. It was too late for the bamboo chairs to be full of Chinese grandparents playing *ma jiang* and drinking *cha*, but the clack of the plastic tiles still echoed from the open windows. Walking along the river, we came to a bridge. John and Sarah wandered off somewhere, and Carol and I sat down at the base of the bridge.

"What if we're not really in China?" Carol asked.

I asked her what she was talking about.

"Well, you saw *The Truman Show*. What if we're really in America and this bridge is the only thing between home and us? What if this is a big biodome in the middle of Idaho and we have had the power all along to just step back into the States?"

"You're right," I responded, playing along. "It was dark when we flew to China, after all. Maybe the plane from San Francisco really did just fly us to Idaho."

Carol and I were not friends. Before the Chengdu trip we had avoided each other due to mutual annoyance and a complete lack of desire to know each other. We sat on the bridge that, in our fantasy, separated us from ATMs, McDonalds, HBO, and

Thanksgiving and conjectured that if we were back in Minnesota we would be taking down Halloween decorations, dating, baking chocolate chip cookies, and making plans for Thanksgiving break. She talked about her boyfriend and how uncertain she was that she wanted to be with him. I talked about how much I missed my golden retriever. We both talked about not having any idea what we wanted to do with our lives. The night got darker. A thick fog settled. We built up the fantasy and wondered who could possibly want to trick us about this whole China thing.

“Well,” I said, “Let’s go.”

Figuring Sarah and John were probably somewhere on the bridge, wanting to let them in on our game, and being half-convinced that we weren’t just playing make-believe, Carol and I walked, mittened hand in mittened hand, across a third of the bridge. The couple we saw standing there was not John and Sarah, but Carol thought she saw them where we had just been. We went back. They weren’t there, and we laughed at ourselves for not being able to cross the bridge. We tried again. The couple we had just seen was coming toward us, and we had to turn back after just a couple of steps to let them pass on the narrow bridge.

“This is ridiculous,” said Carol. “We can’t cross the bridge. Oh, why can’t we just get back to America?” We laughed at her mock panic and became more determined to prove to ourselves that we could indeed make it across the football field-length bridge. We gripped each other’s hands for the third time and marched boldly to the other side. It was dark, foggy, and cold, and we scoffed at what the dean of students and the director of residential life at our small Midwestern women’s college would say about the dangers of our particular situation. We were about to step off the bridge when a very tall, very

shadowy stump scared us away. We ran back across the bridge to the place we knew as China. The Student Advocates Against Sexual Violence would have been proud.

But now, a small, red hatchback taxi driving too close to the curb in Kunming sprayed water on the sidewalk at my feet. As I neared the end of my money changing adventure, I thought, I might have been strong once but not this time. This time I wanted out. I had had enough of strangers shouting heavily-accented hellos from all directions and expecting responses, of waitresses, hotel clerks, travel agents and bus drivers who had no concept of customer service, of phone calls home that cost three dollars a minute and of street signs I couldn't read. I had proven myself, I thought, and I didn't need to work so hard anymore.

And just like that I stepped into the parking lot—the *parking lot*—of the Kunming Golden Dragon Hotel, a joint venture between the city of Kunming and a Hong Kong tourism firm. A fat plastic Santa Claus floated on top of a fountain, and a neatly uniformed bellhop opened and closed the glittery-gold-handled glass doors. The lobby smelled like no other hotel I had been in in China and like nearly every American hotel I had ever been in. It smelled clean. Not just-slosh-some-water-on-the-floor clean. It was not covered in chalk dust like nearly every other building in China. The marble floors shone, and music from a baby grand echoed through the lobby. An elevator dinged and its doors opened promptly. A phone rang and a clerk, in her unwrinkled skirt and unscuffed pumps, spoke in unbroken English. I walked through the hotel with eyes wider than they had been at the Great Wall of China, at the Potala Palace, at the Terracotta soldiers, at the marketplace in Beibei. I barely noticed the stares of the well-suited businesspeople milling in the lobby who stood in stark contrast to my *huoguo*-stained

khakis, soaked socks, flat wet hair, and gray-tinged-red-from-bad-laundering College of St. Benedict/St. John's University long sleeved T-shirt. I felt as if I had just come out of the cave of deep China: the backwoods of Sichuan and the grungy backpackers' circuit. Here showers would run hot all the time, and all showers would be private and clean, with no strange roommates, unstained carpets and showerheads attached to the walls. In this hotel of the Golden Dragon life would be beautiful.

Most beautiful of all was the smell—not just the sterile smell I had encountered when I first arrived, but something altogether more familiar and homey: roast turkey. I followed my nose into the hotel restaurant, where a sign advertised “Roast Turkey with all the trimmings buffet: only 86 yuan.” 86 yuan would cover two nights in the backpackers hotel we had chosen as well as two or three bowls of noodles. I left the restaurant and changed my money with a very friendly, very professional clerk at the foreign exchange counter and stepped back into the cold, dark, crowded cave.

When I got back to my hotel and told Sarah about the meal at the Golden Dragon, we nearly talked each other into splurging. After all, this was a mere eight days after we had eaten a Christmas Eve feast of stale ramen noodles on a bumpy, rolling train ride through Sichuan. We were tired, we were sick, and we were verging on the point of not caring about money. We thought back on all the third-class train accommodations, the “low-end” hotels that cost between \$1 and \$5 a night, \$10 being far too expensive, the budget buses that took the longest, bumpiest roads but saved us \$5, and the showers we had missed because we didn't want to use a communal shower. I wondered what the point had been. Some of our friends had flown everywhere and taken luxury buses whenever planes weren't available. They stayed in Holiday Inns, and if they had come

across the buffet at the Golden Dragon, they would have shelled out the 86 yuan because they could. And we could have, too, really, because we did, after all, have credit cards, and what's \$11 on a Visa bill? Sarah was sick and I was lonely and all either of us wanted was a bit of home.

We indulged in our American fantasy for a while, but we were both stubborn and reluctant to give in to a Western temptation when we had so little time left in China with real Chinese food. A sense of adventure and the Lonely Planet convinced us to try a Chinese version of comfort food: Across the Bridge Noodles, a Kunming specialty. According to legend, says the guidebook, a scholar needed to do his work on an island near his home, and his wife brought his meals to him. They were both frustrated, though, because by the time she prepared the food and walked it across the bridge to him, the meal was cold. Brilliantly, she discovered that a layer of oil would keep broth hot for quite a long time, and all she had to do was bring the bowl of hot broth and a plate of ingredients to her husband. When she got to him, the chicken broth was still hot enough to cook the thin slices of raw chicken and pork, to absorb the flavor of green onions and to heat long white rice noodles.

Sarah and I, new to the Across the Bridge Noodles scene, stood tentatively in the line the waiter pointed us to. We were first to buy our tickets for the bowl we wanted: 2.5 yuan, 3 yuan, 5 yuan or 10 yuan. The cashier sat in a barred-in booth, and the line was outside. We had no idea which bowl to order, so we got the same deal as the family in front of us: the 5 yuan bowl. The woman gave us our thin red and white rice paper receipts and motioned inside the white tile-walled restaurant. The day's rain had created plenty of mud, and as this was a popular restaurant for Across the Bridge Noodles, plenty

of people had tracked the mud all over the floor. I laughed to myself about the fit some Americans would throw if they walked into an American restaurant with floors like that.

The hotel had been elegant and clean, but this place was alive. Children talked at whatever volume was appropriate to what they were saying. Adults laughed and called to each other from opposite sides of the dining room. There was mirth and lightness in the poorly lit restaurant. I couldn't help envying the Chinese children whose parents didn't shush them in public.

We sat down at the nearest clear table, which happened to be right next to four young members of the People's Liberation Army clad in their green uniforms. After a waiter took our tickets, Sarah noticed the soldiers smiling and laughing and looking over at our table. She smiled back, and we ended up sitting down with them for an extensive conversation of hello, *ni hao*, *Mei guo*, and some stuff about really liking China. She tried on someone's hat and we all had our picture taken together. Completely happy at this point, we moved back to our own table to feast on the folkloric dish the Lonely Planet had promised. It was chicken noodle soup: the most delightful and delicious chicken soup I have had in my entire life (Sarah and I went back to that restaurant every day of our three-day stay in Kunming. We left the restaurant feeling full and ready to meet the rest of the challenges of our last eight days in China.

At that moment I understood the point of our austere travel arrangements. Most Chinese travel on trains, not airplanes, and by far more folks in Kunming eat at noodle shops than at Hong Kong hotel buffets. I had spent my first ten days in China on a tour bus, ten feet above every person on the street. It took me weeks to feel as if I had gotten off that bus, before I befriended real Chinese people and could carry on a somewhat

coherent conversation. I had been frustrated because I didn't know how to get "up to my elbows" in China. I had longed for immersion, and traveling by train and eating Chinese food were part of that immersion. It would be foolish to spend all my time in a pseudo-Western world when I had been so frustrated in September with my inability to shed my Western trappings.

During the academic semester I had wondered what all my Chinese language practice was leading to since we were to spend only three months in Beibei, especially since every time we did anything on campus, there was someone nearby to back us up: a Chinese friend, a teacher, one of our American professors, or just a random student who happened to speak English. The longer we were there, however, the more frequent the occasions were when no one was there to back us up. I realized that, in addition to the value of each moment in Beibei, my American friends and I were learning how to survive in China without translators or babysitters. If Sarah and I had taken airplanes and stayed in the nice hotels, we would have been wasting much of the "practice" we got in Beibei. It was fun to be forced to speak Chinese to communicate. This is not to say that we did not encounter English speakers in our travels, but there were fewer than there had been at the university. I would not say that I traveled like the average Chinese, particularly since the average Chinese goes hard seat on trains, but I feel that I was so much closer to their experience than I would have been had I flown.

When I think about it now, this reasoning seems incredibly flawed. For one thing, we had no chance of assimilating to a Chinese lifestyle, no matter how many trains we slept on or buses we bounced around in. I didn't know what we were trying to do, but I did know that I wouldn't have been comfortable traveling any other way. When others in

our group who made different choices regarding transportation and accommodations questioned us, we said that we wanted to take trains because that's how Chinese traveled. Neither of us had a whole lot of money, either, so taking the train made more sense anyway.

The idea of taking the train because the Chinese do it that way, though, is a little strange, I think. We had the money to stay in nice hotels and fly places, yet we chose to do it the hard way, like the Chinese. However, I suspect that most Chinese people would have thought we were nuts for taking the bumpy, roundabout trains and sleeper buses rather than flying. This partly represents a common misunderstanding among Chinese that all Americans are exceedingly wealthy.

A more plausible reason for traveling via train is stubbornness. I can fly anywhere. Flying is easy. You don't know where you are when you're flying. Everything is small and completely out of reach from an airplane. Commercial planes smell the same, look the same and have the same temperature no matter where you are. The people all look basically the same, too. Passengers make minimal small talk but spend most of their time ignoring the strangers sitting next to them. I might as well take the Disney World fly-over tour of China rather than spend the money and time getting there. The same goes for staying in the Holiday Inn and eating Roast Turkey Buffet dinners. I did not want to give in.

I know that I wasn't a perfect traveler when it came to avoiding Western indulgences. Sarah and I ate a few Western-style breakfasts at backpackers' cafes and spent a week in Dali, the backpacking Mecca of southwestern China, where we lounged around and talked mainly to other Westerners. It was an easy vacation.

But Dali was where I learned that I needed to find a balance between satisfying my urges for cheese and native English speakers and my personal urge to make my time in China worthwhile. I was at a point where I didn't need an escape but where I would take whatever concessions were available. Dali was almost paradisiacal, with its grilled cheese sandwiches, coffeehouses, hot brownies, internet access, book exchanges, pizza, pancakes, bike rentals, and gondola rides. It was also expensive and deadly on my stomach, which was unused to rich foods and dairy products. After three days we were desperate for some good old-fashioned Chinese food. We rented bikes and rode about half an hour from the tourist circuit to feed our cravings for fried rice and chicken with peanuts. There was something impure about the Western food in those places, a concession to Western tastes that echoed a time when Western countries had taken control of and colonized many Chinese cities. Dali was different than other places I had been in China. The rules were different (Marijuana was tolerated), the food was different (cheese, cream, and chocolate), and the people were stock figures (vendors, restaurant workers, and hotel clerks). We stayed through New Years and then boarded a rickety old bus headed for Kunming, the Golden Dragon Hotel, and Across the Bridge noodles.

Three days after arriving in Kunming, Sarah and I boarded our last Chinese train, this time for a monster, forty-nine hour trek from Kunming to Guangzhou. This train was nicer than the one we had taken on Christmas Eve: the squatter toilet emptied directly onto the track rather than into a tank, and Sarah and I were in the same set of beds rather than half a car apart. This car was also more modern than the first one in that it had loudspeakers that blared revolutionary marches, Beijing Opera, television dialogue and American elevator music with an equal lack of volume control. The music started at 6:30

every morning and played until 10 p.m. The lights went out at ten and came back on at eight. The train attendants poked and hit at us whenever they wanted to sweep up the peanut shells and candy wrappers. A very cute little girl kept telling Sarah and me that we were *bu hao*: bad.

I read to pass the time. My book of choice was Jung Chang's 1992 book, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*. The book chronicles three generations of Chang's family, her grandmother, her mother and herself, as they experience revolution in China in this century. It is a beautiful and painful memoir that puts names and faces on the victims and persecutors of the imperial system, of the Japanese occupation, of the civil war, of the communist takeover, and of the Cultural Revolution. Reading it under any circumstances would have been troublesome, but surrounded by people who had lived through much of the history I was reading about, I felt helpless. I felt as if I was reading something terribly important that should be taken by everyone as an important piece of life, as important as literature on the Holocaust, as a warning of what people can do to each other; and as with Holocaust literature, I felt as if it didn't have anything to do with my life. It wasn't my history. I had no right to feel pained, frustrated or angry because it wasn't a part of my heritage; and if it wasn't a part of my heritage my anger, frustration and pain felt like little more than shallow righteous indignation. The seventy-something-year-old man in our car who constantly applied a salve to his lip and who made Sarah and me leave the lid on our steaming ramen noodles for ten minutes to double their volume must have lived through some version of most of Chang's book. He was a quiet, unassuming man, small, gray-haired and hunched over, who spoke little English but was delighted by pictures of our families. As he sat on the stool opposite our bunks reading

days-old issues of the *People's Daily* newspaper, I imagined him to have been an intellectual and hoped the Cultural Revolution had been gentle on him. I hoped that he had not suffered through "struggle sessions" wearing a tall, conical dunce cap while students and Red Guards hurled insults at him, kicked him, and tried to break what they perceived to be his bourgeois tendencies:

I saw a dozen or so teachers standing on the platform on the sports ground, with their heads bent and their arms twisted into the "jet plane" position. Then, some were kicked on the back of their knees and forced to kneel, while others, including my English-language teacher, an elderly man with the fine manner of a classical gentleman, were forced to stand on long, narrow benches. He found it hard to keep his balance, and swayed and fell, cutting his forehead on the sharp corner of a bench. A Red Guard standing next to him instinctively stooped and extended his hands to help, but immediately straightened up and assumed an exaggeratedly harsh posture, with his fists clenched, yelling: "Get back on the bench!" He did not want to be seen as soft on a "class enemy." Blood trickled down the teacher's forehead and coagulated on the side of his face. (293)

I hoped, too, that he had not been sent to some remote countryside to be "reeducated" as a peasant farmer, as Jung Chang, her parents and some siblings were, and as my literature teacher in Beibei had been. The lack of language skills that kept me from asking him about himself—anything that would fit him into the saga I was reading—frustrated me,

though not nearly as much as the suspicion that had he been literate in English he still would not have been allowed to read *Wild Swans* and that due to China's notorious repressiveness, any conversation about the country's recent past might have been unsafe.

Along with providing diversion during the two-day train trip, *Wild Swans* filled in some important gaps in my China Experience. I didn't know if I had been assuming without basis some sort of danger for Chinese who spoke about the uglier sides of Chinese history and politics, or if the danger of spies among the people and secret police monitoring conversation did exist. I don't know if anyone of my group ever actually found that line between conversations of cultural exchange and grounds for treason; we didn't dare go near it lest we inadvertently cross it and endanger our friends. The book became something of a generic history of many of the Chinese people I know. I wanted to believe that they and their parents had all had clean hands—most of my friends were born after Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution. The book added to the rich tapestry I had already experienced by complicating the simple and lovely picture of the Chinese my experiences had drawn for me. Reality insisted that the persecutors didn't disappear when the architects of the Cultural Revolution—Mao's Gang of Four—were taken from power. *Wild Swans* reminded me that there is so much history behind all the faces that seem to form a homogenous sea of black hair, dark skin, and almond eyes.

I wondered what Jung Chang and her mother would say about our chosen austere travel conditions. Chang discusses with some bitterness the grading system for communist officials that prevented her mother from ever riding soft seat on a Chinese train. She was certainly never allowed to fly. Mao put in place a system that rated

officials based on their political purity, family background, and activities during the Civil War. The grades determined everything in the officials' lives, from pay to housing to access to information to modes of transportation. Because she had a "questionable" family background—her stepfather was a Manchu and she had cousins who worked for the Kuomintang—her grade never went high enough to permit her free access to travel.

Beyond that cultural consideration, I sometimes wonder if it was foolish of us to think that we could "be like the Chinese" by traveling by train. It's not that we really thought we could be Chinese, but we knew that we would have more access to Chinese people on trains than on planes. It was interesting to be on a train. On the planes we had taken with our entire group we sat next to wealthy overseas Chinese and other Westerners. Most spoke English or some European language. When we got to Beibei we learned Chinese because we wanted to and because it made communication with vendors and restaurant workers easier. Most of them, however, knew some English. And nearly everyone in Beibei knew "Hello," "American," and "Titanic." Outside of this college town, however, Sarah and I found that many people didn't even know those bits of English.

On one level, our low-end travel plans were great for pushing my personal limits—removing me from my comfort zone and showing me what I could do. My language skills improved because often I absolutely had to speak Chinese; English wasn't an option. I gained confidence zipping around bus systems and train schedules and found out that I'm pretty resourceful when I have to be. On another level, though, the way Sarah and I traveled filled in some pictures of China that I had missed during my semester in Beibei. We lived among educated people near the largest city in China. The

people we were in contact with weren't wealthy, but I think they were well off compared to many uneducated people in rural areas. Not that everyone in Beibei was educated or spoke English, but it was easy to focus on the ones who were educated or did speak English. Traveling on trains and buses brought a little more reality to my experience by dispelling this picture I had in my head of everyone being passionate about US culture and spending their free time learning English. I don't think I would have gotten this touch of reality had I traveled by plane.

Through the Layers:
Getting off the Bus and Making it Real

The songs, the dances, the food, the speech. Oh! She was such a romantic, so in love with the air she breathed, the honeysuckle that grew just beyond the door.

"I will pay for this," she often warned herself. "It is probably a sin to think of people as Art."

-Alice Walker, *Meridian*

One of the struggles I had during my first few weeks in China was knowing what to write on postcards to my friends and family back in the United States. All I had to show them was a wonderful scene from the Li River, or pictures of the Forbidden City, the Terracotta Soldiers or Mao's portrait over Tiananmen. I knew what was expected on postcards—things are great, the scenery's beautiful, I absolutely love this place, wish you were here—but I also realized that there was no way to sum up the world I had entered with stock postcard phrases. I wanted to write that everything looked really cool but that I didn't know what I wasn't seeing. China was absolutely exhilarating. I wanted to tell everyone about it, but I also knew there was more to it than the exhilaration.

The first discrepancy between my picture of China and the reality I encountered there was in restaurants. There were about thirty-five of us traveling together, so we would usually have six or seven people around five or six tables. We always ended up with far more food than we could eat, and many of us wondered what they did with all

the leftovers. The mystery was solved one day when the waitresses cleared the tables while we were still sitting at them—and the food all went into the same slop bowl. All I could think of was the admonition I had grown up hearing on TV, in the movies, and at school: “Don’t waste that food; there are people starving in China!” But there I was in China, and there the food was, going into the garbage. That was the kind of thing that didn’t fit on a postcard, either spatially or conceptually. After only ten days, I already knew that China was just too much to put on a three- by four-inch backside of the Temple of Heaven.

The people-starving-in-China thing was my first realization that this place was not going to fit my Western concept of China. Without even thinking about it, I had assumed that people in China were perpetually hungry. Looking back, I know that when I got on Air China flight 1288 to Beijing, I had no idea what China was like at all.

For the first five or six weeks, I felt so terribly peripheral to China and Chinese life and people that I wondered what could possibly be the point of my spending four and a half months there. My university, Southwest China Normal University, or Xi Shi, has a square library with a courtyard in the middle that we cut through to get from the back entrance to the computer lab where we could use e-mail. The hallways are open to the air, so standing in the courtyard I caught glimpses of what went on in the building. The whole building could see me but still I was outside. It seemed the perfect metaphor, I thought one day in early October, for the still-on-the-air-conditioned-bus-in-Beijing feeling I had had since arriving in China. “I’ve been parked in a Chinese reality for weeks, now,” I journaled, “but I’m still on a bus—not really seeing the people who live in China, even though I could reach out and touch them: the people who walk next to me

on the way to the post office or the library, or even the friends who teach me *ma jiang*. I'm not experiencing culture shock because I still feel like a tourist." I felt as if I were still floating through China, neither touching nor being touched by anything Chinese. "I look at China, I smell China, I hear China, I walk on China, but I don't see China and I certainly don't feel China," I complained to myself. I saw the cracked cement sidewalks, the dirty gray buildings and the lush mountains, and I smelled the *ce suo*— the public toilets, the frying spice, the garbage piles and the falling leaves. I tasted *hua jiao*— numbing spice, the rusty boiled tap water, the too-sweet Coca Cola, the egg fried rice, dumplings, rice candy and pollution. I tripped on uneven paving, splashed mud, said *ni hao*—hello—to small Chinese children, avoided stray chickens, cursed the loud bells and horns of speeding bicycles, and denied all compliments. I got used to eating with chopsticks, learned to barter and haggle for a "fairer" price, accustomed myself to the ever-present sound of construction and washed my clothes by hand.

I felt superimposed on China—like one transparency laid over another. It looked as if I were there and getting into the food and culture, but I didn't feel at all as if I were digging in and getting to the heart of life in China. One problem was that although nearly every person was interested in us and most were very friendly, I didn't know anyone well. One of the main selling points of CSB/SJU's China program was the close relationships American students develop with Chinese. I had heard from past program members that they formed fast friendships they would never have thought possible and were broken-hearted when they left China. It shocked them, they said, to discover how close they became to people from a country they had always perceived as alien. I was doomed, I feared, to never know any Chinese people. Because of my insecurity and

ignorance of China, I didn't think I was going to be any good at getting to know Chinese people. Early in our semester several of us went for Chinese hotpot—*huoguo*—with LeAnn, Olive, Bessie, Lily and Aileen, some Chinese girls Daman and Ryan had met near the basketball courts. The next day I realized that I was going to see around campus the five young women who had taken us to dinner. I wasn't sure I would be able to recognize them or distinguish them from the other 11,000 students at Xi Shi.

"They'll know you," said my roommate. "They'll run up to you on campus and hug you."

I had never had much practice identifying and distinguishing people from the same ethnic group—besides other white people—from each other. I grew up in a predominantly Caucasian community and go to a very Caucasian college. In my hometown I recognized and distinguished the Asian faces because there were only five of them. And they were in the same family. And one of them was in my class.

China was a whole other ethnic ball of wax: 1.2 billion people with straight black hair, olive skin and almond-shaped eyes. The first times I saw LeAnn's friends on campus, I only knew I knew them because they greeted me by name. It took me two weeks to be able to say with any certainty which girl was which.

LeAnn, on the other hand, was immediately and always recognizable to me. She distinguished herself as a forward and wild woman, ready to meet any and all challenges, the first one, in our experience with her, being meeting one of the new Americans on campus. When she saw Ryan and Daman walking near the outdoor basketball courts, she didn't hesitate to approach them to invite them and their other American friends to dinner. When Ryan and Daman went back to our dorm—the *waiban*, LeAnn gathered

her roommates to practice their English and look up new words in their dictionaries for their first lengthy encounter with Westerners.

The next night we met her and her roommates outside the *waiban* gate and walked to our *huoguo* dinner. LeAnn regaled us all with stories of the fishing village she grew up in and with her ability to remove bottle caps with her teeth. She boxed with the boys and giggled with the girls. Her face was unforgettable because of the spirit that lay behind it, a spirit determined to get out of Chongqing—the largest city in China but still just her hometown—and further than her two-year degree in tourism would take her. Besides being nearly fluent in English, she is skilled enough in German to be admitted to a German language institute in Chongqing. She hopes her experience there will allow her to go to Germany to study or work.

Her friends were subtler, but still interesting and strong. I eventually learned their personalities and faces, too. Aileen was the most chic Chinese girl I ever saw: she brushed her hair straight back from her face and curled it up at the ends, painted her lips a very urban dark red, and wore a curve-hugging leather jacket. Olive was the giggly one who often left get-togethers early to be with her boyfriend. She resembled a pixie, I thought, with her tiny face and short hair. Bessie was soft-spoken and shy but always seemed interested in what was going on around her. Lily seemed to be the least excited about her tourism major; the idea of giving tours of the temples, bridges and museums of Chongqing made her dread graduating.

It took me a while to feel comfortable away from a large group of Americans. All of us knew that it would be nearly impossible to meet people if we walked around with seven or eight other American people, but I didn't have the confidence right away to go

off on my own. Insecurity about how the Chinese would receive me coupled with a horrible sense of direction kept me within shouting distance of other Americans for the first few weeks. Now I see that my need to be with Americans probably slowed down my getting into life in Beibei. It was so easy to go to the computer lab with other Americans, eat with other Americans and walk into town with other Americans that for the first several weeks in Beibei I didn't open myself up to the possibility of meeting anyone. In a way, it seemed like such an impossible task that I didn't even bother to try.

My perspective changed during a five-day trip up and down the Yangzi River and through the Three Gorges in early October when I realized that I missed Beibei and the life I had begun there. I missed the girls from the *huoguo* night, and I realized that I was getting better at remembering who was who. The Yangzi trip was the first time I felt as if I were getting "off the bus" and into China. I was surrounded by Chinese people and finally travelling pretty much the same way they were. The thirty of us were sleeping eight to a very small room, and there was no entertainment on board the boat except for what we could come up with on our own. We talked a lot, and I read and journaled quite a bit, but I could only take so much self-reflection. A couple of the men in my group had brought *ma jiang* sets with them, and many of us spent hours at a time playing with each other and with some of the Chinese on the boat. LeAnn and her friends had taught several of us how to play, and then we taught each other, so that by the time we were halfway through the Yangzi trip nearly everyone knew how to play this traditional Chinese tile game similar to gin rummy.

We set up a table in the common hallway area of our fourth-class floor. Chinese passengers, delighted and intrigued by fair-skinned foreigners playing their game,

crowded around our table, siding with and coaching whomever they stood behind. Every discard, *pong*, *chi* and draw was met with an approving or disapproving “uh-h-h” or “n-n-n-n.” It was a little annoying, very charming and altogether helpful. Instead of simply knowing the rules and methods for playing this game, I gained a concept of *ma jiang* strategy and learned how to keep open as many options as possible.

After one of our Yangzi *ma jiang* matches, and after witnessing the strength of spirit and will of Hu Fen, one of our Chinese teachers, who chooses not to go by an English name, in making the ship’s captain keep his promise of showing us the Three Gorges Dam project, I felt for the first time that I would be sad to leave China, not just out of regret for opportunities missed but because I knew that I would really miss this person.

Hu Fen played a lot of *ma jiang* with us. This thirty-ish woman had ushered us through Beijing, over the Great Wall of China, around the Terracotta soldiers in Xi’an and down the Li River in central China. She made sure we were treated fairly by bus drivers, restaurant owners and hotels, and advised us on the proper price to pay for tourist trinkets. When we arrived in Beibei she had taken up her position as liaison between us and the university and taught a section of Chinese. On this boat trip she was more friend than teacher, showing us patty cake games and learning English slang. She sat next to me as an opponent in many games and stood behind me as a coach in a dozen more, cheering my victories and getting excited every time I discarded the right tile without guidance. When we were traveling in September I was so into seeing China that I didn’t even see this Chinese person who was orchestrating the entire trip. I sent postcards to my family and friends telling them that “China is wonderful” and “The people are amazing.” I

described the Great Wall in great detail and neglected to mention Hu Fen, who had made the first two weeks there as easy, enjoyable, and without trauma as possible. When I did notice her, I noticed her charm and felt that her tenacity was just a part of it. Chinese women in general seemed to have a “don’t mess with me” attitude that was shocking to those of us who had grown up with the concept of Minnesota Nice. We giggled to each other and marveled at the bluntness that allowed Hu Fen to raise hell with bus drivers intent on saving time by driving on winding, pockmarked, mountain-hugging roads with shock-free buses full of carsick Americans rather than on the straight and wide roads that would have increased driving time by little more than ten percent.

I imagine that the cause of her tenacity, however, is probably not picturesque or beautiful at all. Hu Fen is the child of people who survived Mao’s revolution in the forties and then survived such Maoist disasters as the Great Leap Forward in the fifties and the famine that ensued. The child of educated parents, she grew up and came of age during the Cultural Revolution, when the educated came under heavy attack, enduring torture, defamation, imprisonment, and exile to the countryside. On top of those historical hardships, she is a woman in an intensely patriarchal society. In the past fifty years women have had to overcome a thousands-year-old tradition of concubinage, forced marriage, foot binding, and an overall condition lacking rights, freedom, and self-determination. Women had even philosophy working against them, as they faced Confucius’ “Three Obediences”—when a woman is young she obeys her father; when she is married she obeys her husband; when she is widowed she obeys her son. The laws regarding women changed drastically when the Communists came to power, but attitudes change more slowly. I grew up with a stereotype of Asian women as docile, and though I

knew that laws and conditions had changed, I don't think I realized how that would translate to the demeanor of the Chinese. Hu Fen stands her ground and ensures just treatment and fair service. Tenacity is a means of survival.

I realized two things during this trip away from Beibei. One was that I did have the skills to make friends with the people around me and that I actually had begun to form friendships. I had heard that this was going to be such a spectacular, beautiful experience, but my experiences, while interesting, had been fairly shallow. I felt like a failure of a China traveler because my time there hadn't been magical. After getting to know Hu Fen, though, I felt that when I left I would not just leave the place, I would leave people behind as well.

The other thing I realized was that I was incredibly eager to jump into life at Xi Shi. On the Yangzi I had had a taste of "getting off the bus": of being something other than a tourist and seeing the potential for the friendships I wanted so much to have in China. One afternoon after checking my e-mail, instead of going back to the *waiban* I walked to the playground where the first-year students have their mandatory physical education classes. The playground is a long expanse of earth with two volleyball courts, three soccer fields, and several basketball courts lined up in a row. I sat in the cement bleachers and wrote a letter to my sister. The gym class nearest me took a break, and fifty eighteen-year-old girls swarmed around me, laughing and calling, "Hello! How are you?!" One brave girl ventured to make even more conversation.

"What's your name? Are you an American?"

"Yes, I'm an American, my name is Katie. What's your name?"

"I am Wei Wei, and this is Shi Ying. We are Physics majors. What is your major?"

"I major in literature," I told her and her friend. I had figured out early in the program that it is much less confusing to say literature than English because I already know English and they are the ones who need to study it in college.

"Very pleased to meet you," said Shi Ying haltingly. She had not had as much practice as Wei Wei.

My two new friends were called back to their volleyball game, but we agreed to meet for dinner the next night, choosing the post office as a good meeting place since we all knew where that was. Wei Wei and Shi Ying were also new to the Xi Shi campus, and they nearly always ate at the "canteen" near their dormitory. Since I ate dinner at restaurants every night, I knew more about the restaurants on campus than they did. I suggested Zhou Jie Jie's, a restaurant famous among us Americans for having amazing food and a friendly, motherly proprietress.

Zhou Jie Jie seemed very excited to see us when we walked into her restaurant. She seated us and brought us our customary tea and dish of sunflower seeds and peanuts. "Gureen beens?" she asked. "*Si ji do? Gong bao ji ding? Hua cai?*" My menu choices were somewhat predictable.

Wei Wei and Shi Ying didn't object to this menu of Four Season Green Beans, chicken with chilies and peanuts (a Sichuan specialty, known in a blander incarnation in the States as Kung Pao Chicken), and cooked cauliflower, so I gave Zhou Jie Jie an affirmative "*Dui.*"

While we waited for our dinner we showed each other pictures of our families. They laughed at pictures of my ten- and thirteen-year-old nephews wrestling with my golden retriever and marveled at the picture of my mother when she was twenty and looked just like I do now. I saw the one picture they each had of their families, taken a few weeks before they left for college. Shi Ying was twenty-nine hours by train from her family in western Sichuan province. They prevailed upon me to speak some Chinese, so I recited two new phrases I had learned that day in my Chinese class: “*Wo you san ge ge ge he yi ge jie jie*” and “*Xian zai shi ji dian?*” I have three older brothers and an older sister. What time is it? They raved at my pronunciation and amazing Chinese skills, which seemed crazy because though they berated their own English skills our conversations were in English.

This same sense of wonder at many Chinese people’s ability to use the English language struck me later that week when I attended an English conversation group made up of eight American students and about twenty professors at the university. They all had a basic understanding of English, but most of them, like most Chinese learning English, had learned grammar basics and written English. Spoken English was something that few had any experience with, and many were nervous. Many members of the group came only sporadically.

We devoted most of the “class” time to small group or one-on-one conversations to give the professors as much speaking practice as possible. We all developed “regulars;” Chen Hong, a psychology professor in her early thirties who soon became my friend, was mine. She was preparing for an English test that stood between her and a year in Canada. Her determination to succeed on this test made her overcome her

embarrassment about her "poor" English and come to our practice sessions nearly every week. Many, like Chen Hong, wanted to improve their skills so they would do better on foreign language tests and have a better chance of getting some sort of foreign appointment.

Over the course of the semester Chen Hong and I talked about school, work, the past, our futures, and the way things work in China. She often brought pictures of her travels around China to help me plan where to travel after my semester in Beibei ended. She advised me on career plans and love. Chen Hong told me about her six-year-old son, whom she called "active," and explained her mixed feelings about the possibility of going to Canada for a year. Her husband and son would not be able to go with her, but going to Canada to study and teach would be an amazing opportunity.

Our friendship moved beyond the formal classroom conversation and activities in early October when I realized that winter was coming and that I was without warm clothing. I needed to buy a sweater, so at English group that week I asked Chen Hong where a good place to buy a sweater in Beibei would be. Instead of suggesting a good store or giving me directions, she told me to be at the gate of the *waiban* at eight the next morning. She would help me buy a sweater and make sure I got a fair price. It was extremely nice of her, considering that she had class at ten that day and probably a dozen things to do beforehand.

She was there at exactly eight. I met her at the gate, and we walked down the hill and through the back gate of campus. We walked up the hilly road, past the men tinkering on the mountain, carving away at it to widen the road, before she got us a minivan taxi. We shared the cab with four people and a squawking, uncaged chicken. It

dropped us off about five blocks away, at the heart of Beibei's commercial district. Here you could buy fresh vegetables, *ma jiang* sets, Oreo cookies, soap, alarm clocks, washing machines, batteries, underwear, Leonardo Di Caprio stationary, CDs, dumplings steamed or fried, boiled noodles, shoes, and sweaters. It wasn't quite winter yet, and the search was a little longer than I thought it would be. Many stores weren't carrying sweaters yet, and the ones that did had only "old lady" sweaters, according to Chen Hong. We searched half a dozen stores and approached class time when I finally found one that I liked at a price that satisfied Chen Hong.

A few weeks after we went shopping for my sweater, Chen Hong granted my unspoken wish of getting to go to a Chinese person's home. She invited my roommates and me to join her and two other professors from the English group in a dumpling—*jiaozi*—party. It was the first time I had been invited into someone's home, and I was really excited. She met us at the gate of the university and walked us the three blocks to her building, where we climbed six flights of stairs to her apartment. The hallways of the apartment building were what I had pictured when I thought of what a Chinese apartment building would be like: cold, dark, made of cement, dirty, noisy, muddy and smelling of garbage and cooking eggs. There were no overhead lights in the common walkways and no glass on the windows. When I walked into her apartment, however, I found it wasn't a cold, dark, cement hole but a *home* in the warmest, coziest, cleanest sense of the word. Her apartment, which she has since moved out of, had beautiful hardwood floors, which she was as careful with as an American would be with white carpeting. A small bookcase stood right inside the door with space underneath for our street shoes. She had us take off our shoes and, to keep our feet warm, gave us pairs of flimsy, fuzzy slippers.

Vendors all over Beibei sell these slippers for about fifty cents a pair, so I think this shoe removal system is fairly common in that part of China. She arranged her small living room with a small dining room table against one wall, a long black couch against the other and an arm chair in between, all forming a perfect triangle of space for her son to bounce between. She kept her refrigerator in the family room and decorated its front with her son's artwork from school. An end table displayed a brief pictorial history of her family, while a space heater placed near a tall wooden lamp warmed the living area.

Because the purpose of the visit was to make *jiaozi*, in Chongqing a pork and chive-filled dumpling, the formation of which is a social event, I spent some time in Chen Hong's kitchen as well as in her living room. Though it was tiny and not the most modern kitchen I had ever seen, some very tasty *jiaozi* came out of that kitchen. She had a small one-basin sink, two burners, a garbage pail and a short counter. The refrigerator sat in the living room near the dining room table. A square of blue fabric and a bowl of pink flowers covered the three-foot fridge. While some of us gathered around the kitchen table to fold the dumplings, others sat on Chen Hong's sofa and told stories about parents, pets and school. We talked, snacked, played cards, made dinner, ate way too much and were shocked at how much food we had left over. It was like a family gathering where everyone gets along.

The dinner at Chen Hong's was one instance of my feeling comfortable and somewhat at home in Beibei. The more people I got to know and the more they let me into their lives, the more attached I got to living in that place and the more attached I wanted to become. I had breakthroughs in my capacity to learn Chinese—after three months I finally felt as if my brain were ready to absorb and retain what weeks earlier

had been indecipherable syllables to me. I ate with my friends in their cafeteria rather than in restaurants. I learned how to say “I love you” in Chinese.

After becoming so attached, leaving Beibei was one of the most painful things I’ve ever done. I knew that I would never again see most of the people I had met there. While I know I’ll go back to China and there are certain people I will make every effort to contact and stay in touch with, it will never be the same and some people I won’t be able to find. For three months I had put down my roots on the other side of the planet, the place small children try to dig to, the place parents refer to when their kids waste food, the place Sunday morning political consultants mention with guarded voices.

On my last day, I walked into Beibei on my own because I needed to buy a scarf for my trip to Tibet. I went into a warehouse market filled with stalls of vendors selling all sorts of household goods. The only long wool scarves for sale came with matching wool hats, and I already had a hat. My reluctance to buy another had more to do with principle than money—it was only three dollars for a set, but I didn’t want to buy another hat and have it sit in my backpack for the next four weeks. I tried to ask the merchants if I could buy a scarf and not a hat, but I didn’t know the word for scarf. I stood between two stalls and felt frustrated. I heard my name. Fairy and Alean, two friends of my roommate, were shopping in the same market and asked me what I was doing. I explained my little problem, not really expecting help, just wanting to vent my frustration. “How do you say scarf?” I asked.

“*Wei jin*,” Fairy explained. I sang it to myself, trying to get the tones right. *Wei jin, wei jin, wei jin*. “That’s right!” she said. “You have very good pronunciation.” They took me to four or five different booths, but all the vendors said the same thing to my

scarf-without-a-hat request: *mei you*. Not have. I thanked the girls for their time and walked back to campus. I was discouraged at first because I was going to have to buy another hat. Then I thought about being in the middle of a Chinese city and running into Chinese people who knew me. They weren't just yelling "Hello! Hello!" to a strange American, and I wasn't saying *ni hao* to strangers.

That night I ate two dinners: *sao cao*—spicy, oily barbecued vegetables and meat on a stick—with Wei Wei and Shi Ying, and hand pulled noodles in spicy broth with my friend Michelle. In between I went roller-skating with Wei Wei and Shi Ying. They made me promise to tell them if I ever found a boyfriend. Shi Ying, nearly silent for the first three weeks I knew her, told me about how she missed her own boyfriend, a factory worker in her hometown in western Sichuan province. She thanked me for helping with her English and for encouraging her to speak the words she knew and to learn new words.

I hugged Wei Wei and Shi Ying and said goodbye, promising to write letters forever and definitely to tell them of all future romances. I met Michelle and my roommate Calista at one of our favorite restaurants. Legend has it that Marco Polo brought pasta to Italy after his extensive travels and life in China. He must have stopped at this noodle stand first. They served amazing pasta there: hand-pulled noodles made by the owner in front of all diners. He worked at a wobbly wooden table near the wok, mixed flour, egg and water to dough and began pulling and slapping the gooey ball on the table. He pulled and doubled the dough until it was one long noodle. He gave the noodle to his wife who boiled it in much-used water and mixed it with spicy broth. I always ordered *cu la mian*—spicy broth, no meat. The paint on the table was peeling, the water in the pot was emptied once a day, and the white and blue plaster serving bowls were

swished through cold, brown, soapy water between uses. The wok and the oil in it were used all day without cleaning or changing. These methods and conditions all make for very flavorful food. Calista and I both took pictures of the man working his noodle magic. Michelle reminded us again not to miss the Yunnan town of Lijiang, which had survived the Cultural Revolution with much of its architecture intact. "Even though it had an earthquake it is still beautiful," she insisted. We promised to get there and told her about our other travel plans: Tibet, Dali, Kunming and Xishuangbanna in southern China, Guangzhou in the east, Hong Kong and on to the United States.

We finished dinner and went back to the *waiban* to listen to some music, exchange gifts and tell all the stories we could before eleven o'clock when all Chinese had to be out of the *waiban*. Calista and I walked Michelle back to her dorm, and I hugged her—hugged my Chinese roots—goodbye. I went back to my room and waited for my mother to call Beibei for the last time. She reminded me to be careful about altitude and breathing in Tibet. I said I couldn't believe I was leaving for Tibet in five hours. She said to be sure to call at Christmas. I missed her. I didn't want to go to Tibet or Dali or Lijiang or Hong Kong or Hawaii. I wanted to be home, and if I couldn't be at my Beibei home, I wanted to be at my American home. I didn't want to drift through China for four weeks as I had drifted through it (albeit on a big bus) during the first two weeks of my study abroad experience. What I loved about China wasn't the Great Wall or the Terra Cotta Soldiers, and it wasn't the idea of running off to China because I was disenchanted with the Western world and wanted to find myself in a simpler place. Everything I loved about China, I thought, was in Beibei. I loved people; I loved the little boy at the noodle stand who jumped up and down shouting, "Hello! Hello! Hello!"

to us as we ate his dad's noodles. I loved buying fruit from the same woman three times a week and knowing that her oranges would always be sweet. I loved having dinner with Chen Hong and her six-year-old and knowing that he only pretended to be shy with foreigners. I loved it that every time I saw Heidi Graczyk's friend Lydia she would say, "Now we will have a conversation in Chinese," and she would make me speak Chinese. Instead of answering *hen hao*—very good—to my inquiries about her general state of being, she would say *hao*—good—because that was more sincere. I loved running into Chinese people I knew. I loved being known.

The time I spent in Beibei, while the heart of my experience in China, was also a preparation for the last four weeks I was to spend traveling. As much as being in a group of more than thirty people bothered me in September, I knew that then I hadn't had the skills or confidence to travel without interpreters and grown-ups. I had learned enough Chinese to buy bus tickets, introduce myself, book hotel reservations, order food, and tell people I met about myself. I knew what foods I liked and felt confident to try new foods as we moved to different parts of the country. By the middle of December when I left Beibei, the *Lonely Planet* and a traveling buddy with as much experience as I had were all I needed to get me safely to Hong Kong.

If those last four weeks were to have any sort of impact on my life, if I were going to be the kind of traveler in China who really sees and appreciates her surroundings and conditions, and if I were going to be a positive representative of my culture, the ultimate goal couldn't be merely getting safely to Hong Kong. Part of me really wanted to withdraw into myself because I felt that nothing in China could possibly be as good as it had been in Beibei. As I traveled I struggled with this desire for withdrawal—to stick to

the backpackers circuit and sit around in cafes talking about homesickness and traveling in China—and wanting to be true to what had been so amazing about my time in China in the first place. I valued my interactions with people in Beibei, and I still treasure the friendships I maintain now. My time in each place Sarah and I traveled to would be brief, as would my encounters with the people in each place, but that didn't mean they had to be shallow.

The people who irritated and turned me off the most when I was traveling were the “I'm going to find myself in China” people: the people who saw China as exotic and distant and so opposite to the Western experience and lifestyle that it is the logical place to go get in touch with yourself. The people who eschew Western civilization with all its capitalist trappings and individualistic ideals go to China to remove themselves from the evils of corporations and the complexities of this life we live here. The stereotypes are many: things are simple, after all; people live by millennia-old traditions and under the iron fist of Communism; it's the perfect place to go to discover Taoism and Buddhism; to get in touch with your inner self. The Chinese people along the way are somewhat incidental and unimportant. They are the ones who sell the bus tickets and overcharge for musical Chairman Mao lighters. They are the ones watching to make sure Foreign Devils make no transgressions that could endanger state security. They are peripheral to many Westerners' experience in China. Or they are Art. They are the old people in the park doing *tai chi* at six in the morning, the men in their Mao Jackets and the women in their wool cardigans. They are the children wearing bright red Mary Janes and corduroy jumpers calling “hello, hello!” from their grandmother's arms. They are the vendors sitting on the carts of apples during *xiuxi*, the afternoon break. They are beautiful and

elegant and kind and romantically impoverished, but not altogether human. They don't speak our language, or if they do they speak a charming version we like to call Chinglish. Their sign painters are poor translators, and we find that wonderful. What, after all, would China be like without the "Box of Fire Extinguisher"?

American travelers abroad have a two-part responsibility. We should be responsible to ourselves by making an attempt to see the people around us as more than stock characters—vendors, tour guides, and bus drivers. While it would be impossible to form a friendship with every person I encountered in China, it's ridiculous to see those people as nothing more than the tasks they performed in my service. The people in China are not there for Westerners to have a good experience in China, either as tour guides or as Art. We also have a responsibility to the Chinese people and to our own society to be more than stock characters to the Chinese. The Chinese have certain preconceived notions of Americans, as we have of them. Often when people ask me what I enjoyed most about China I'll tell them it was getting to know so many Chinese people and really feeling as if my cultural stereotypes had broken down and been replaced by real faces, voices and stories. I realize now that besides learning about other people and seeing beyond a stereotype, I was also able to make myself real to many Chinese people. This happened on different levels depending on how I knew them. Somewhere in China there is a woman selling fruit who knows that not all Americans are drinking, smoking, violent sex addicts and that somewhere in the United States is a young woman with short brown hair who likes the small sweet oranges that peel in one piece, buys bananas only to make bread, and nearly always hums, whistles, or sings when she walks down the street. When the United States bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in the Spring of 1999 and

people across China were enraged with Americans, the friends we had made in Beibei remembered the Americans they knew and believed us when we said most American people hated the bombing. The Chinese people do not exist to provide a positive experience for Western travelers looking for themselves, but if a China experience is not based on interactions with people I don't see how it can be truly valuable.

Those interactions, so important to traveling in China, aren't directed by the guidebooks. The *Lonely Planet* is fine for finding hotels, adequate for descriptions of tourist hot spots, and great for its list of characters every traveler should be able to point at to find his or her way to the bus or the bathroom, but it can't tell its readers how to "get off the bus." One touching and thought provoking experiences I had in my travels came in an unassuming, out of the way place in Lhasa, the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region. Five blocks from our hotel was the Potala Palace, winter home of the Dalai Lama and pilgrimage site for thousands of Tibetans. Down the road was the Jokhang temple, the holiest place for Tibetan Buddhists. Our state-arranged tour guide took us to all the must-see spots in and around Lhasa, including the palace and the temple, along with a few monasteries. After three days of organized tourism we were free of our guide and his ideas of what the ideal tour in Tibet is. The best experience came a few days later. Calista, Sarah, our friend Daman, Christa from Australia, and I went to an orphanage in the community of Teolung, outside Lhasa. We had read about it in a notebook that guests at our hotel, the Pentoc Guesthouse, had written in, and we got directions from the clerk at the desk. We went to the market outside the Jokhang temple and bought candy, apples and pencils for the children and set off by taxi for the orphanage. The two Tibetans who run the Swiss-supported orphanage welcomed us,

pulling us into the central courtyard and bringing us jasmine and butter teas. It took the five of us some time to move away from each other and talk to some of the kids, but some little girls adopted Daman, and the rest of us wandered off in other directions. I found some six- and seven-year old boys doing homework and sat down to see what they were doing. They were very shy at first, but I handed one my journal and some markers and asked him to draw a picture. He drew me a Potala and a vase of flowers. Another boy drew a car and another flower vase. I also got a bird and a tree, all colored in fluorescent blue, yellow and green because I only had highlighter markers with me. I think their experience with markers had been limited because they started drawing on each other.

They showed me their English workbooks, asked me to say some of the words that went with the pictures, and showed me how they wrote their names in Tibetan. The governess called us to lunch. We Westerners were somewhat skeptical about what they might feed us in an orphanage and felt a little guilty about taking food from the orphans, but they insisted and we had no choice. They served us boiled yak shoulder, winter vegetable, and warm steamed bread. We had apples for dessert. It was practically a home cooked meal. I was still feeling guilty about taking their food when Christa said, "Don't feel bad for eating it, feel bad if it tastes really bad." My new boy friends and I played one last hand of Go Fish with the Minnesota State Parks playing cards I had, and it was time to go. I left them the cards, the extra hat I had bought the week before in my other life, and my highlighter pens. The residents of the Teolung orphanage lined up and shook each one of our hands. We took a group picture. The five of us took a bus back to Lhasa.

Sarah and I flew “back to China” a few days later. We spent a couple of days in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, a city often referred to as the “gateway to Tibet” because so many flights leave from this western Chinese city. After our daytime excursions to places like the giant panda breeding center and Ren Min Park, we spent our evenings at Paul’s Café, a hangout for the many Westerners who pass through the city. Over vegetarian lasagna, an English woman talked excitedly about the sit-down toilets she had in her hotel. (Most Chinese bathrooms are equipped with the “squatter” variety: a hole in the ground or a trench with no seat. Users squat on their haunches over the hole. Some squatter toilets have flush mechanisms and some empty out into a big pit). She raved about some performance she had gone to the night before. “The women were dancing in cages,” she exclaimed repeatedly.

I told Sarah and the English woman about my day in Ren Min—the People’s—Park. We had split up earlier that morning at the park. Sarah went to write in her journal and I found my way past the children’s playground to a large grassy area filled with small stone tables. It was a sea of *ma jiang* matches, and I wandered through, hoping someone would invite me to sit down and play with them. One group of older ladies picked me out and directed me to sit down. I think they thought it would be fun to see how a Westerner played their game. I played with them, they gave me treats, I almost won a couple of times. By the time I had to go meet Sarah again I felt as if I had had a taste of what it might have been like to have grandmothers.

The English lady asked what *ma jiang* is.

I probably shouldn’t be so judgmental about the obnoxious English woman; I think I reacted so strongly to her because she was a caricature of me before I decided to

go to China. I didn't know anything about Chinese history, language, art or culture. The little bit I did know was based on stereotypes and Eurocentric, business/industry/national security-based media reports. When I tried to picture China all I could see was a gold-star-speckled red flag and an oversized portrait of Chairman Mao presiding over Tiananmen Square. Going to China meant going behind the flag and into a world that I thought was static and homogenous. Standing in front of Mao's portrait was both humbling and humorous. Humbling because it is indeed a huge portrait and contains an image that has moved billions of people, and because it watched over the massacre of hundreds of Chinese protesters in 1989. It represents China to many people in the West, and serves as a symbol of Communist oppression. It was humorous because hundreds of people were lined up to see the preserved corpse of the Great Helmsman, and they were buying plastic flowers to lay at the base of the glass-covered table on which his body lay. At the end of the day the caretakers of the mausoleum gather up the flowers and put them back on display to be sold again the next day. Humorous, too, because I later found out from the Chinese on campus that most of the people who parade through Mao's tomb don't even believe that that is his body. It is a meaningless tourist ritual for them as it is for us.

Considering my absolute lack of knowledge of anything Chinese, sometimes I think that I had no business going to China. I had read Lao Zi in my First-Year Symposium and taken a class in Chinese medicine. I had discussed the Asian economic crisis in an International Relations class, and I had seen *Seven Years in Tibet* and *The Joy Luck Club*. I went to that country with no realization of current China or what it meant to be Chinese. I did not know what the Cultural Revolution was. I did not understand the

difference between the Communists and the Nationalists. During the summer before I left I did not bother to learn a single word of Chinese. I was going for the adventure. I wanted to become tougher, stronger and more independent. I wanted to jump right into something that was as foreign and unreal to me as anything else on earth. Europe was far too tame and Western. When people asked me why I was going to China I told them I was going because I wanted to "experience China." I'm not sure what I meant by that.

The woman at Paul's Café was so offensive probably because she was what I could have been had I remained a lazy foreign traveler. It is absolutely possible to spend months in China without learning how to say "hello" or "thank you" or even how to use chopsticks. I'm sure that when her friends back in London asked her about China she told them about the women dancing in cages, the grilled cheese sandwiches at Paul's, and her relief at having a sit-down toilet in her hotel room. Maybe she told them about the two strange American girls who went on and on about some park in Chengdu and a curious game called maw john. She was so offensive because she represented a failed experience in China. She failed to really see Chinese people beyond their value as Kodak moments, and she failed to show Chinese people the depth of her Western character beyond the Hollywood image that so many Chinese believe represents all Westerners. Rather than tearing down the stereotype of the ethnocentric, arrogant Westerner, she perpetuated it.

The Chinese are not the tapestry behind the China experience; they are the China experience. But that's not all they are. Chinese do not exist to provide Westerners with an adventure. I met maybe a hundred Chinese people and got to know ten. I wonder

what right I have even to "love China," or to long for it. I know nothing compared to what there is to know about China.

Little Carrot and the Dalai Lama

One Sunday night in mid-November the University staged a bonfire and dance festival on the soccer fields. The event was meant to display and honor the dances and dress of China's ethnic minorities, especially those most present on XiShi's campus. There were perhaps two hundred Chinese students and about half of the American students in attendance. The Tibetan, Bai, and Dai dances were exotic, particularly in the light of the flickering bonfire, surrounded by more than two thousand clapping and laughing revelers. The last dance was a group participation one, in which the entire crowd joined hands and pretended we knew how to dance Tibetan-style. As the breathless excitement died down two Chinese girls who had been sitting behind me during the show approached me and introduced themselves. Lily, an ethnic Tibetan, and Nancy, a Bai from Yunnan province in the south, were both third-year English students. They asked me about myself and how I liked China.

They said that that Friday was an important day in the history of the Chinese Communist Revolution and asked me if I would like to commemorate the day with them. November 27, Lily said, is the anniversary of the murder by the Nationalists of dozens of Communist heroes during the Chinese Civil War. The two parties had worked together during World War II and the Japanese occupation to rid China of the Japanese forces. When the foreign threat was gone, the two parties and their leaders—Mao Zedong and

the Communists and Chiang Kai Shek and the Nationalists—battled to determine who would rule China. The Nationalists set up a prison outside Chongqing in the district of Sa Ping Ba, about an hour's bus ride from Beibei. As their hold on China began to crumble and the Communists advanced closer to Chongqing, the Nationalists decided to destroy the population of their Sa Ping Ba prison. According to Lily and Nancy, the prison at Sa Ping Ba was turned into a museum to commemorate the brave but ill-fated prisoners. It was, according to the signs and plaques, a horrible place to be if you were a Communist in China in the late 1940s.

On November 27, then, I went to my morning classes, ate lunch with my group, and went with Lily and Nancy to see that prison. Our bus let us off at the city center, where tourists and pilgrims milled about and looked at various memorials set up by the city. Lily found a motorcycle cart taxi to take us up the mountain to the prison-turned-museum, and we joined the crowd of uniformed elementary students and workers. There were torture chambers and stories in Chinese about individual prisoners. The bullet holes from the guards shooting at escaping prisoners in the final hours of the massacre were still there. Nancy walked me to the wall and put my hand to one of the bullet holes, moved my fingers through it, and speculated that the bullet fired after this one probably didn't lodge itself in a stone wall.

Just up the hill from the main prison and shooting ground sat a Communist-erected statue of an eight-year-old boy who had been in the prison and had starved to death there. Little Carrot, so called because the Nationalists were so evil, Nancy told me, that they did not feed this boy, bringing him to such a state of malnutrition that his head grew wider than his shoulders, giving his body a long, tapered look, was a hugely

emotional figure for little kids. His parents were imprisoned at Sa Ping Ba for years; the little boy was born there, in fact. The elementary school students who go there put their little red achievement handkerchiefs around the statue's neck and feel sad for him and his tragic death.

I found myself getting sucked into the Communist propaganda. It was strange because I grew up with opposite influences. Though the Cold War was waning during my childhood and had ended by my early teens, anti-Communist attitudes were prevalent enough that I entered early adulthood with the distinct impression that Communism and everything about it was evil. Though my parents weren't vocally or vigorously anti-Communist, there were enough influences around me to convince me that I would not want to be a little girl in a Communist country. Editions of the *Weekly Reader* had articles about kids from Moscow who were lucky enough to come to the United States on mini-exchange programs, escaping for a little while the horrible, anti-capitalistic conditions their government subjected them to. Soviet visitors on television sitcoms like *Small Wonder* were super-intelligent, hardcore Soviet nationalist, robot types who cheated in competitions but reformed their devious ways when given the opportunity to defect to the United States. My social studies teacher snarled when he said the word "Communism." We never talked about feudalism or why Communism could gain such strong support in so many parts of the world. We never talked about the desperate poverty that made the toppling of a social order that elevated the wealthy while virtually enslaving the poor so desirable. Through college coursework I gained a basic academic understanding of poverty and the conditions that drive revolution, but I never saw people in an undemocratic setting.

That part of me resisted feeling sorry for the prisoners who had died, arguing that these were Communists, after all. The US government sided with the Nationalists in the Chinese Civil War, as evidenced by the villas that line the road up the hill to the prison—villas built for and used by American military officials. I had been socialized to distrust Communism and Communists. If I had learned of this prison in an American high school, the massacre of November 27 would have been taught as an act of Nationalist heroism. I wasn't learning about it in an American classroom, though. I was seeing it in person and touching its bullet holes. I was hearing about it from people who lived the legacy of the eventual Communist victory. I was seeing the pictures of the people my age who had died because they wanted something different than the emperor, the Japanese invaders and the Nationalists, who placed heavy policy emphasis on the rich while ignoring the overwhelming peasant majority. Communism, with its promise of a classless society, must have seemed the perfect alternative to the decidedly class-oriented systems the Chinese were used to.

I had a hard time reconciling the young, innocent, murdered faces in the pictures with Mao Zedong and the repressive system he established. The museum route paraded us by a few torture chambers. Large wooden chairs with leather straps on the arms sat next to long wooden tables covered with instruments of torture. I couldn't get close enough to see exactly what their specific functions might be, but did get close enough to know that I wouldn't want to be sitting in that chair with my wrists strapped in the leather straps. I had a hard time not seeing the prison and the museum it became through American lenses. I was alternately condemning and justifying their existence based on my American education, and I was looking down on my Chinese friends' accepting the

pathos of the massacre of the Communists and the joy of their eventual victory. There was a huge conflict over the Sa Ping Ba prison between the anti-Communist sentiments I had grown up with and the humanitarian instincts my parents nurtured in me.

How convenient for the government, I thought, that they had this prison and massacre that they could commemorate every year, stirring up pro-government sentiment among the masses, and especially developing it in the little kids with the martyrdom of Little Carrot. The Communists did to Nationalists, and are doing to people who voice oppositional opinions, the same things and worse—much worse—that the prison museum is designed to memorialize. Where are the memorials to the people the Communists killed? They're not there because memorials to the opposition, especially when the opposition is domestic, encourage the opposition. The architect of the Sa Ping Ba prison museum wasn't interested in commemorating the dead as much as he was in building one more center for Communist worship. It's as if the people who died in the massacre and those commemorating the massacre, though all Communist Party members, aren't really the same kind of people. Maybe it has to do with what side of power they were on—the prisoners trying to get power to effect change, or the present government trying to keep power firmly in its grasp. The faces in the photographs are those of idealists who never had the opportunity to enact oppressive legislation or to spur on the Cultural Revolution.

We walked back down the mountain, stopping at a couple of mansions built for Nationalist officers and American supporters. Lily and Nancy asked me questions about Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, Tom Cruise, and Disney World. We talked about good-looking men and how we hoped to spend the rest of our lives—both girls were

going to teach English in their hometowns in Yunnan province. I did not challenge their interpretations and descriptions of the prison.

We ate dinner in a small restaurant at the bottom of the mountain and took a \$.075 bus back to Beibei. My roommates had already gone out for the night, so I settled into a chair with my *waiban*-provided quilt and a copy of the Dalai Lama's autobiography, *Freedom in Exile*. I planned to go to Tibet when the semester ended, and since my knowledge of that part of the world was limited to what could be gathered from *Seven Years in Tibet*, starring Brad Pitt, some background reading seemed like a good idea. I paged through the book, in which the exiled spiritual leader of the Tibetan people discusses his perspective on the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1950s. He gives a chronology of his being discovered to be the fourteenth incarnation of the Dalai Lama, of his upbringing in Lhasa, of the Chinese invasion, and of his exile. He talks about the destruction of monastic life in Tibet and of its reconstruction for the sake of tourism. He pleads for the preservation of Tibet's natural environment. He comments on the Chinese government's policies toward Tibet: "Nor can I understand what motivated those people within the Chinese leadership who actively counseled the total destruction of the Tibetan race. It seems that China is a country which has lost its faith, as a result of which the Chinese people have themselves endured unspeakable misery over the past forty years" (268). He expresses his hope for peaceful resolution and his belief that not all Chinese are bad. My roommate Calista returned with our mutual "best" Chinese friend Michelle, who spent as much time with one or both of us as we could manage and who always had something nice to say.

Michelle grew up in southeastern China, near the tourist hub of Guilin. It is an area of “karst” land formations, as the guidebooks told us, meaning that the land was dotted with tall, narrow limestone mountains. This is the land of classical Chinese paintings. Michelle, our little dreamer, grew up surrounded by mythical mountains.

I shouldn’t say “little.” Michelle is about six months older than I am, so technically she should call me little. Conversely, she is about six inches shorter and twenty pounds lighter than I, so I guess it just depends on how you define little. Sometimes I felt as if I took on an older sibling role with her: the first time I met her, Calista brought Michelle and her roommate to our room so we could show them how to carve pumpkins for Halloween. A few weeks after that, she made banana bread with us; it was the first time she had ever baked. I felt as if I were baking cookies with my two young nephews.

It worked both ways, of course. The same night we taught Michelle the proper use for the word “hottie” she introduced us to *xiao huoguo*, a smaller, cheaper, and easier version of the *huoguo* we had been used to eating, and kept us from several retail rip-offs. She often admired my short brown hair (while I longed for her long black locks) and assured me that no one would notice the big red spots on my forehead.

Even though it was her country and she was the expert in getting around and fitting in, I tended to see myself in the older sibling, older friend role. As with many assumptions older siblings make about the younger ones, I was wrong when I assumed that she would take on the peacemaker, non-confrontational role.

“Do you like him?” Michelle demanded, pointing to the picture of the Dalai Lama on the cover of my book.

"He seems like a pretty good man and leader," I answered. This ground seemed treacherous because I didn't know what I could say or what might get her into trouble. No one ever clearly defined those boundaries, and I think that sometimes I was more cautious than I needed to be. Calista and I looked at each other.

"What do you think of him," she asked Michelle.

Michelle, in the fiercest, most adamant, most nationalistic voice I had heard since I arrived in China, proceeded to tell us that the Dalai Lama was a very bad man who tried to keep Tibet from the Chinese and who ran a feudal theocracy. We argued about it for a while, Calista and I telling her about the repression of religion and culture in Tibet and the lack of freedom ethnic Tibetans have, and Michelle telling us that none of that happens and whatever violence does occur is necessary for national security. For her, Tibet belongs to China, end of story.

The complicating factor in any discussion we had with Chinese about recent Chinese history was that many Americans and many Chinese used the same evidence: television. We could say that we saw the tanks in Tiananmen Square, for instance, that we heard the reports of the dead, and that Dan Rather and Tom Brokaw told us the entire story. We could say that we have heard the Dalai Lama talk on television and have seen the Tibetan exiles. We've seen countless documentaries on all of it, and none of it makes their government look good. They, however, have CCTV: state-controlled television. They can say they saw the tanks pull away peacefully or that the students demonstrating were really hurling grenades or rocks because that's what they saw on television. So while we say, "Your government made that up and put it on your television," they can level the same charge against our government and media. The Dalai Lama conversation

was pretty heated, with none of us willing to let go of our concepts of the rights and wrongs of Tibet. Michelle is Han Chinese, like ninety-four percent of people living in China. The other six percent consists of people from fifty-six minorities, including Bai, Dai, Naxi, and Tibetan. Han Chinese feel and the Chinese government legislates that the Han are superior to the minorities. For them, it's not so much that Tibet is a renegade province needing strict regulation as that the Tibetans (*Zhang*) are an unruly people within the state of China who must be watched and controlled lest they do anything to jeopardize Chinese control. Moreover, the Chinese feel that they have liberated the Tibetans from an oppressive religious dictatorship and that the Dalai Lama is the symbol of all the oppression and evil of the old Tibet. Bringing them under Chinese Communist control eliminated the feudal society and brought all people closer to a state of economic and social equality. Besides, "Tibet has always been a part of China," Michelle told me.

I had a hard time with this reasoning. Whenever I thought about Tibet it was as an overthrown and occupied gentle Buddhist place. The buttons, after all, say "Free Tibet." You don't need to free a place that is going through the positive change Michelle says China is bringing Tibet. Maybe the idea that the American media had manipulated me was just too much to take in. Michelle is partially right, though, because most Americans, my pre-China self included, only know what pop culture has to say about Tibet. "Free Tibet" is something of a fad. Since I've been back in the US many people have asked where I went in China. When I say Tibet their eyes light up and they say, "Wow! that's cool! I saw *Seven Years in Tibet*!" That movie was pretty much my source of knowledge on Tibet, too. The American viewer sees Tibet as the fourteenth Dalai Lama is coming into his leadership. He is a progressive-thinking, curious teenager who

grows into a sensitive and thoughtful leader wanting to modernize his country. The Chinese invasion of 1950 halts his progress and eventually forces him into exile while the Chinese implement their own brand of progress. In the film, the leader laments that the tragic thing is they were trying to change on their own. I still think that the news media in my country is more reliable than CCTV, but I think our pro-Tibet culture and media have manipulated us not to notice the aggressive facets of Tibet's past. While we see Tibet as peaceful and simple, historian Melvyn Goldstein presents a much more complex view of the country in his book, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon*. He outlines Tibet's history as a major Asian power before the Mongolians invaded many of the region's countries in the thirteenth century. As the centuries passed Buddhism became more firmly entrenched as the religion of the Tibetans, but political intrigues did not end, and the Tibetans did not become absorbed into China. East Asian Studies scholar Lee Feigon, in his book *Demystifying Tibet*, debunks the Chinese historical claim on Tibet:

In truth, for thousands of years Tibet's history has both been intertwined with China's and separate from it. But in spite of what China claims today, Tibet historically has not been dependent on China or—before 1950—been a part of China. It is true that in the thirteenth century, when the Mongols ruled China, and again from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century when the Manchus ruled that country, Tibet was loosely associated with China. But in all other periods Tibet's history has been politically and culturally totally independent of China's. Even during the times of the loose association, the Chinese exercised no control over their neighbor's internal affairs. The Chinese themselves did not argue that

Tibet was part of their country until the twentieth century. Indeed, most early Chinese nationalists wanted nothing to do with Tibet. (23)

Reading I've done since returning from China both challenges the image of Tibet as innocent victim-state and destroys the Chinese claim that Tibet has always belonged to them. The conflicting research may seem to make taking a stance on the "Free Tibet" issue more complicated, as well. Often, Americans need victims to have clean hands in order to back them, and if their hands aren't clean, we don't want to know about it. Feigon asserts that, "Although this image [of Tibetans as innocent and peaceful] is meant to glorify the Tibetans, it really obscures them. It perpetuates a stereotype of Asians who are either all good or all evil, never real people...Instead of treating the Tibetans as a separate people, it casts them again into the shadow of the Chinese" (22).

I didn't know how our disagreement over the Dalai Lama would affect my friendship with Michelle, so I was a little nervous about our lunch plans the day after our discussion of Tibet. When Michelle showed up at the *waiban* for lunch, though, all was well. I met her at the gate, she took my hand, and we walked to the restaurant we called the Green Door (because it had a green door). This was my favorite place to go for dumplings, but they had other good food, too. Michelle always ordered the *yue xiang rou si*—fish-smelling pork. There's no fish in it, but the pork is cooked with spices and flavorings like those used for fish. I always ordered the *dan chou fan*—egg fired rice. I could never finish a whole plate, though, and Michelle liked to tease me whenever I ordered it.

Michelle and I didn't really talk about Tibetan autonomy again after that. She didn't say much about politics at all, except that her nationalism and love of China were

obvious from the way she said “Tibet” when we talked about my going there—the way people talk about any exotic, distant and conquerable piece of land—like the moon for instance.

A few days before I left Beibei I went to a *huoguo* dinner with Michelle, Calista and some other Americans and Chinese. We ordered only our favorite things—no brain, vocal cords or stomach linings—and Michelle made sure that there was plenty of *hua cai*—cauliflower—because Calista and I liked it so much. The eleven of us sat around the propane-fire heated hot pots eating cauliflower, chicken, tofu, carrots, spinach and beef for about an hour and then started taking pictures: “best friends,” roommates, neighbors, random groupings, everybody. I stood behind the stool Michelle sat on, holding her hand. I started singing “You Are My Sunshine.” “My only sunshine,” she echoed back. We both started to cry, and I had to leave the restaurant. By the time I had composed myself and could face my friend again, our whole party was crying and huddling close in pairs or threes or fours. Calista and Michelle sat at one end of our table trying to talk about sunshine and flowers and other cheerful things. I stood with them, and when I tried to look over Michelle’s shoulder to the crying people behind her, she took my face in her hands and said, “No, don’t look at them. Happy thoughts. Happy thoughts.” It was beautiful, charming and tragic all at the same time because we all knew how limited our time together was; in less than a week Calista and I would be in Tibet, and Michelle would be in Beibei eating *huoguo* and *sao cao* without us.

That weekend we all attended farewell banquets and parties, big ones hosted by the *waiban* and our teachers, small ones hosted by Chinese friends, and one we threw

ourselves to say goodbye to our friends. We said our group good-byes after that party, going downtown for one last hit of *sao cao* and dancing at a favorite disco/karaoke bar.

Monday was our last day of school. We went to history class and turned in our papers. Professor Li Li gave us the lecture on Mao, the Cultural Revolution, Tibet, and Taiwan that he had promised us at the beginning of the semester. It was a one and a half-hour class. The gist of it was that Mao, whose policies sparked the Anti-Rightist Movement, the Cult of Mao, the deadliest famine in Chinese history, and the ten-year paralysis of Chinese education, family life, politics and culture, was only thirty percent bad and seventy percent good. Li Li, who had spent two years in England, told us that there were protests in Tiananmen Square but because he didn't know anyone whose children died there, the Western estimates of hundreds of dead could not possibly be accurate. Maybe a handful of violent students died there, he said. The class period ended before he had a chance to talk about Tibet and Taiwan.

That night I said goodbye to Wei Wei and Shi Ying and to LeAnn and her friends. Then I met Calista and Michelle back at the *waiban*. We ate and exchanged gifts. I gave Michelle my silver claddaugh ring, which she had admired every time she looked at my hands. She cried when she unwrapped it. She gave me a small comb, "for your beautiful short brown hair," her card said. We met Heidi, another American, and her Chinese friend Lydia a little before eleven, when all the Chinese had to be out of our dorm, and we all walked back to their building. I felt as if I were walking a death row prisoner to the electric chair, only I wasn't sure who was the one to be executed. It wasn't that any of us was facing a horrible life, it was just that the prospect of the loss of each other was so big—like losing a part of ourselves. We all embraced in the empty street outside their

dorm and one by one began to cry, then sob, then shake. Our huddle swayed and whimpered until a door slammed, signaling the imminent locking of their dorm door. Michelle and Lydia ran off to their rooms, and the three of us stood there watching and listening to their footsteps, as if we could hear them climbing the steps to their seventh-floor rooms and tiptoeing so they wouldn't wake their six roommates. I had never realized that a moment like that could exist: that I could stand in the middle of a dark, empty street in the middle of China and weep as I had never wept before over friendships with people I had met only months earlier and whose lives bore little superficial resemblance to mine. Perhaps the biggest tragedy was that I hadn't realized how much Michelle meant to me until that night. Calista and I had been teasing her for a while about how we were going to smuggle her into America so that we wouldn't have to miss her, and at that moment a part of me was trying to think of a way to make that happen.

I went back to the *waiban*, called my parents and went to bed. Five hours later I left for Tibet.

We took the usual tours with our government-appointed, government-required tour guide: the Potala Palace, the Dalai Lama's winter home and seat of Tibetan government; the Jokhang temple, the holiest place in Tibet; and the Barkhor, the circuit of vendors around the Jokhang; and for the first time ever I ate yak meat. It's pretty tasty, actually. While most people and official policy had been incredibly friendly to

westerners in Chongqing and other parts of China, that attitude was decidedly more guarded in Tibet. A sign in our hotel posted the following regulations for foreigners:

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Welcome to Lhasa. So that you may have a safe and enjoyable time, we would like you to be aware of the following government regulations.

- 1. Foreigners traveling in China must abide by Chinese law and must not endanger the national security of China, harm its Public interests, disturb the Public order, or engage in any other activities incompatible with tourist status.*
- 2. If Chinese citizens are holding a rally or demonstration, it is strictly forbidden for foreigners to participate, follow along with, take pictures or video film of any of these affairs. Foreigners are not allowed to interfere in Chinese internal affairs.*
- 3. In accordance with Regulations, foreign tourists must go through all registration formalities and stay only at a designated hotel. Without prior permission, travelling in unopened areas, using undesignated transportation, operating individual business or privately taking up an occupation is forbidden.*
- 4. It is forbidden to visit and photo the sky burial site according to the local government's regulations for the minority nationality's habits and customs. The tourist who breaks the regulation will be punished strictly.*
- 5. For safety reasons, it is strictly forbidden for foreign tourists to travel by tractor or other privately operated means of transport. If by chance a traffic accident happens, under those circumstances you will be responsible for your own actions and results.*

6. *Valuables should be deposited in checkroom, otherwise, the hotel won't be responsible for the loss.*

No matter what Michelle and Li Li had said to try to persuade me that all was as it was supposed to be in Tibet, now that I was there, nothing could possibly convince me that Tibet is a part of China. This is as different a world from China as China is from the United States. For one thing, the Tibetans speak their own language: Tibetan. It is written in an alphabet, not in characters, like Chinese. One of the men in my group made the mistake of offering a Chinese hello—*ni hao*—to a monk in a temple. The monk sternly and firmly reprimanded him: “I am Tibetan, not Chinese.” Even though everyone in Tibet is required to know Chinese, Chinese is not their first language.

For the most part Chinese wear Western-style dress. They don't have the variety of clothing that we have, but they look nice in what they have and take good care of their limited wardrobes. The Tibetans, particularly the ones who did not live in Lhasa, dress as I pictured Native Americans before Europeans and European-Americans wiped out most of their culture and sovereignty. Monks wear heavy maroon wool robes toga-style and seem warm in the sub-freezing weather. Many men, mostly from outside Lhasa, walk through the streets in animal hides turned inside out so that the fur was against their body and the skin kept out the wind. Many women weave turquoise beads in their black braids. Pilgrims and farmers wear tall, hand-sewn canvas boots. They are people from the high plateau on pilgrimage to the Jokhang temple, the holiest place in Tibet.

Part of me longed to go “back to China” where I could speak Chinese with an unburdened conscience. China, the place four months earlier I had had only the haziest

ideas about—I couldn't even operate chopsticks before I landed in Beijing—had become my comfort zone. Part of that had to do with my having learned some of the language and having become proficient at chopsticks. I had grown accustomed to crossing the pedestrian-unfriendly streets in China and to saying *ni hao* to people in passing. Also, it was very cold in Tibet, and the hotels were not heated. I think my desire to leave Tibet was more about intellectual comfort, though. I knew about China's forcing its government on Tibet, about the ransacking of monasteries and the murder of Tibet's religious, about the suppression of Tibetan culture, about the moving in of Han Chinese to make a minority of the Tibetans in their own land, and about the Dalai Lama's need to remain in exile. In China proper I could simply choose not to think about the Chinese treatment of Tibet. I had spent four months falling in love with China, and like any young lover, I didn't want to see my beloved's flaws.

In his travel narrative *Riding the Iron Rooster: By Train through China*, novelist and travel writer Paul Theroux asserts that, "You have to see Tibet to understand China" (478). I didn't understand that concept when I read his book before I went to China, and I'm not sure I completely understand it now, but I do understand that it's impossible to get an accurate picture of China if you just learn a little Chinese and meet some Chinese people. I of course knew about the 1989 protest and massacre in Tiananmen Square and the repressive levels of control the government exercises over the Chinese people, but I had always understood that conflict in terms of the government against the people, with the people being absolute victims. Regarding Tibet, it is apparent that the Han population as a whole contributes either in action or spirit to the occupation and oppression. Michelle, whom I consider a spirited but rational individual, became incensed at the idea

that her American friends could possibly support the Dalai Lama. To her the Tibetans are a subordinate people, and, as much as I hate to believe it, my friend is deeply prejudiced against people of other ethnicities. As Theroux writes, "Anyone apologetic or sentimental about Chinese reform has to reckon with Tibet as a reminder of how harsh, how tenacious and materialistic, how insensitive the Chinese can be" (478).

Until I went to Tibet, I saw and heard what was endearing about China. I met very warm and welcoming people and saw lovely landscapes. I ate wonderful food and had great fun learning a new language. Realities of living in China that I might have found irritating—overstuffed buses, mobs instead of lines at the post office, nonexistent traffic laws—were just facts of life in China that I knew I had to accept. It was not my place to be critical of the Chinese because of the way they ordered their society. I saw the atrocities committed within China as acts perpetrated by a government against its people. Tibet was different in that it was obvious to me that one society was imposing itself on another. I realize that I live in a society that has imposed itself on another, but Native American life has been so removed from mainstream America that it is easy to choose to ignore white society's having corroded and degraded it. In Tibet the advertisements for businesses are written in Chinese and Tibetan. Signs advise tourists about acceptable interactions with Tibetans. Guidebooks like the *Lonely Planet* warn tourists not to pass out pictures of the Dalai Lama or even to try to engage a Tibetan in conversation regarding religion, politics, or history. The contrast between the Chinese and Tibetan cultures was especially apparent on the last day in Tibet when I was on my way back to China. On the way to the airport we drove through the different parts of the city: old and new, Tibetan and Chinese. I was struck by the distinct architecture—square buildings

covered in white tile in Chinese areas and more ornate, untiled buildings marked in Tibetan in the Tibetan areas. It was obvious that the Chinese were moving in, but, after what I had seen, it was also obvious that they had no place there. Even the air quality—thin and lacking oxygen but still easier to breathe than the green smog we had often breathed in Chongqing—set this place apart from what I was used to.

A few months after I arrived home from China, I watched as CNN reported the American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. NATO, led by the United States, was trying to stop Yugoslavian dictator Slobodan Milosevic's campaign of ethnic cleansing against Kosovars and ethnic Albanians. The bombing had been a map error, US officials said. Years ago when NATO's maps had been made, the embassy was not an embassy at all but a factory instead. The US government, displaying accident-inspired panic, assured Americans that this was a fluke of war making; mistakes happen. Hopefully the Chinese would understand how very unintentional the bombing was and all would be well. The next day CNN reported riots in Tiananmen Square—this time against the United States. People who were obviously foreigners left China or stayed barricaded in their rooms and apartments or under security. The US consulate in Chengdu burned to the ground. A Japanese friend of mine in Beibei reported that anti-American cartoons had appeared on chalkboards and bulletin boards and along the side of the road. The news was full of anti-NATO and anti-American reporting, he said. He also noted that before the bombing most Chinese had dreamed "about someday going to America," but

immediately after the bombing a wave of hatred for Americans and the United States swept over the people: "No friends come and talk to Americans, and nobody is friendly to American and foreign-looking people."

When Bill Clinton visited China just months before we arrived, there had been huge pro-American sentiment everywhere. The Chinese had heard about his escapade with Monica Lewinsky and asked about it more out of curiosity than disgust. I had felt welcome everywhere I went, so it was hard to imagine students throwing bottles at what had been my dormitory and drawing anti-American cartoons on the chalkboards that a few months earlier they had used to advertise basketball and soccer games between Chinese and American students.

Michelle e-mailed me to tell me how very fascist my government was. Her e-mails were ugly and hard to read. They were apparently hard for her to write, as well, judging from the punctuation and spelling mistakes—she even made a mistake on the spelling of her own name. She wrote:

Kosovo is a part of Yugoslavia just as Tibet to China. Most of the countries have several nations of their own. Sometimes there will be some conflicts between these nations. The government then will take some actions to stop conflicts and unify the whole country. May be the way to stop it is not right, very cruel, but it is necessary. Moreover, it is the country's own affair, others should not interfere...There are some rebels in Kosovo which trying to be independent from Yugoslavia. In order to stop the rebels, hold the country's stability and unification. Milosovec's policy to rebels may be is not very right and cruel and resulted in a lot of refugee, but at all events, others should not

interfere in roughly, the only one who has the right to do this is United Nation, not NATO, not US. You should know that NATO stroke Yugoslavia under the permission of UN. They threw UN away, use the most advanced and modern weapons, result in more refugee and innocent people's death! NATO is crueler than Milosovec! We call this action (I mean NATO) as Fascist. Everyone who loves peace cannot stand for it!

Well, I hope you can understand and try to think it over. Maybe I am a little extremely, because our press tell me is like that and I believe we are right. Because the ambitions of expanding United States' hegemony is obvious and well-known.

She ended by assuring Calista and me that "no matter what happen, you are still my good friends. Our friendship will not change by these things. I hope you can understand me. Let's pray for the peace of the world." Remembering her very nationalist outrage at our sympathy for the Dalai Lama, we weren't surprised by her anger over the embassy bombing. We were confused by the fascist bit, though. Merriam Webster defines it as:

1 *often capitalized* : a political philosophy, movement, or regime (as that of the Fascisti) that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition

2 : a tendency toward or actual exercise of strong autocratic or dictatorial control.

Fascism sounded pretty Chinese to us. She was the one who brought up Tibet, and that's an issue of ethnicity. In the eyes of the State, the Han are certainly exalted above the

other fifty-six ethnic groups in China. They certainly have the *autocratic government, dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation and forcible suppression of opposition*. Michelle acknowledged in her e-mail that she was influenced by the Chinese press: "maybe I am a little extremely because our press tell me is like that and I believe we are right." She recognized that she was seeing the United States the way her government wanted her to see it, but she couldn't fathom an alternative to the idea of the United States as fascist. It took Calista and me a while to get our minds around that idea. Michelle mentioned our "aggressive hegemony" several times, and although US domestic policy isn't particularly dictatorial, to the rest of the world we probably seem like the ultimate self-absorbed hegemon. From the US and NATO's perspective, Milosevic and his campaign of ethnic cleansing had to be stopped. From China and Michelle's nationalistic perspective, however, a threat to Milosevic's power over Kosovo was a threat to China's power over Tibet. It's fascinating that she could compare Kosovo to Tibet and not see the horrific violence in either of those countries. Ethnic cleansing and the destruction of Tibetan monasteries are necessary evils in her worldview. Others should not interfere.

It's hard not to be critical of Communism or of many Chinese people's attitude of superiority over the Tibetans. When it comes to looking at other cultures, I think there are many things I have no right to criticize. These include religion, methods of education, and traffic law policies. I think that to many Americans it seems a given that once the Chinese—or people of any nationality or culture—see how we run our society it's only a matter of time before they follow our lead and that what we see as their backwardness is something they will eventually evolve beyond. The problem with this

ethnocentrism is that the Chinese ways of educating, writing, speaking, eating, communicating, relating to each other, and governing evolved separately from the Western ways. Chopsticks and noisy restaurants might not make sense to Western tourists, but they don't have to—they belong to the Chinese. Land reform, the toppling of an entire imperial system, and the support freely given to an authoritarian regime might confuse the average Western observer; but after thousands of years of feudal society, Mao probably seemed like a messiah. To a people who had never known anything but authoritarian rule, Communism must have seemed like the natural system to choose, if only because this system didn't seem to carry with it the baggage of corruption and classism the imperial and Nationalist systems did.

But do not mistake me for a cultural relativist. Some things transcend culture and history. I absolutely believe in “the inherent dignity and...the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family,” as described in the preamble to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This definition includes all members of the human family, not just the cousins who happen to be from countries that believe in women's rights, the illegality of torture, the indignity of forced and arranged marriages and the injustice of bans on religion. So maybe to some it seems ethnocentric of me to be critical of China's attitudes of political and ethnic superiority over the Tibetans, but when those attitudes translate into acts against the “inherent dignity” of individuals or of a people, a society opens itself to evaluation by and criticism from people outside its culture. While I believe that the Han people have a right to dislike the Tibetan people, I don't think they—or anyone—has a right to let those feelings of hatred impinge on the rights the UN has accorded all people.

The four months I spent in China, the reading I've done, the correspondence I've had with friends still in China, and the course of recent history don't put China in a neat, lovable package, that's for sure. Even without its treatment of Tibet, China is a complicated place. There's the Cultural Revolution to think about too, which, unlike tragedies like the Tiananmen Square massacre, can't be thought of as simply the government against its people because a government can't function without some sort of support from its people. I've said myself and I've heard dozens of other people say that they love the people of China and hate the government. There is a certain level of complicity from the people, though, in any authoritarian system. For the regime to thrive, people have to be behind it. The Cultural Revolution would have been nothing without the Red Guards, groups of teenagers who chose, because of peer pressure, boredom, or the Cult of Mao, to beat people, burn treasures, and contribute to the halting of much of Chinese society. It is far too simplistic to write off the political, social, and economic oppression of both Tibet and China as a government acting upon its people. This excusing simplifies the situation and the people. Even so, I have a lasting love for the people I knew in China, the things I did there and the overall experience I had there. I have a hard time reconciling this love with the socially-conscious voice inside of me screaming, "Human rights!" Looking at it from only the human rights, political freedom perspective simplifies the Chinese into one-dimensional monsters in the same way that laying all the blame on the government simplifies them to one-dimensional simpletons.

From Minnesota to the Middle Kingdom and Back Again:

Growing and Changing in China

I don't remember what made me decide to go to China. I think I wanted to have an adventure, for one thing. I had planned to study abroad since I was in high school and learned that the possibility existed. I envisioned myself traveling in Europe, seeing ancestral homes in Ireland and Germany, hanging out on French beaches, or perfecting my language skills in Spain. During the fall of my sophomore year at the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University, a few months before applications for study abroad programs were due, I lost nearly all interest in going to Europe. I wanted to go abroad, but the idea of seeing plays in London or touring islands in Greece didn't excite me. I wanted to do something completely different. I had it in my head that I could go to Europe any time, but I did not foresee myself ever going to China on any kind of unorganized whim. The study abroad program through CSB/SJU seemed fairly organized and opportune, so I filled out my application and wrote a cover letter explaining why I would be a valuable member of a study abroad program in China.

At the time I thought it was the most random thing I had ever done: one day I just decided to go to China. Part of me thinks now that going to China was the natural next step in my personal development. A small part of that is the "find yourself in China" attitude. When I think of "finding yourself," though, I think of developing a sense of

inner peace or gaining a defining sense of self. Going to China did almost the opposite for me. I had it in my head that my life had to have a plan and that I had to have the plan made before I finished college. I knew that I wanted to do something I was passionate about, but I felt sure that I would discover my passion by the end of my undergraduate career and then devote my entire life to it. I might have hoped that China would help me clarify what my passion is. Instead, I think my experience in China made me realize that sometimes the adventure is in the not knowing. The only inner peace and clarity I gained was the peace I think I have with not seeing a clear path in front of me beyond walking down a folding-chair-lined aisle in a black cap and gown.

When I got to China in early September I had no idea what the next four months would be like. Before I left the States, people told me I was going to have such a great time and that I would come back changed. Some of these people had been to China and others hadn't, but none was able to tell me how I would change. I didn't understand it at all, either. I thought I would wake up one morning and notice a transformation in myself. I pictured this transformation hitting me and making me new. I realize now that there was a series of moments so small that I didn't notice them that added up to not so much of a transformation as a magnification of myself. I think going to China turned on various awarenesses, sensitivities, and instincts that I might not have tuned into otherwise. Most people wouldn't notice a change in me at all, I think, because I still dress the same, have many of the same friends, and hang out at the same places. I laugh and talk and love and cry the same.

But something in me has clicked into place. I dress, laugh, hangout, talk, cry and love bigger and more comfortably. After an awkward reentry period during which I sat

mutely in my classes, had mini-panic attacks when I had to speak in front of groups of people, and avoided running into people who would insist on making small talk, I found that China made me more comfortable in my own skin. I spent the first twenty years of my life trying to please people, hoping that what I said or how hard I laughed wouldn't seem strange or put people off. I was different than the people around me, and I felt caught between not wanting to conform to the small town culture I grew up in, with its inane back roads keg parties and folks drifting through life with little or no ambition, and needing desperately to fit in somewhere. Moving on to college helped a lot, but I think there are enough similarities between my home and my college that it was easy for me to grow slowly. Many of the changes were outward: I formed a new circle of friends, for instance. My self-awareness didn't grow or change drastically because it didn't have to.

I am the fifth and youngest child of two educated people whose parental goal was to have all of their children go to college. My brothers, business majors all, finished school and began to establish themselves in the professional world. My parents are avowed democrats and managed to raise kids who didn't know how to hate. I grew up Catholic in northern Minnesota spending my school years in a small town full of the descendants of Norwegian Lutherans, many of whom carry a "Catholics are odd" stereotype and passed that on to their children. I wore thick glasses and liked to read. The other kids thought I was a little too different and found new ways to point that out to me every day. I didn't fit into Nevis society, where school buses are the only form of public transportation and football and boys' basketball games the only events that attracted more than fourteen people to one place. Where I come from, "feminism" is a

dirty word and China is a different planet. I don't think the word "ethnocentrism" appears in dictionaries in Hubbard County.

At the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University students work very hard to find their niches and not look like everyone else. Some, favoring the Gap, refuse to shop at Abercrombie. Others choose J. Crew over Eddie Bauer. Many eschew the mall altogether, finding their individuality in used clothes at Savers and Goodwill. They enjoy shopping there together. In China, no one noticed what any of us wore. The Chinese saw us, at first, collectively as Americans and eventually as distinct people and personalities. In some ways, we went to China and all became the same; we took the same classes, ate the same food, knew the same people, danced to the same music, laughed at the same jokes, watched the same movies, felt pain and joy of similar natures and said goodbye to China together. I had always thought that the lifestyle choices we make define who we are, but in China the lifestyle decisions were made for us. I have come to realize that many of those lifestyle choices are superficial and unimportant. I feel as if I shed all the baggage of developing a personality and a persona and just was. I danced in the hallways and sang on the street because it felt good and it was fun. People smiled and children laughed and I felt like myself. I climbed up mountains and rode on motorcycles for the first time ever because the opportunity was there. I told a roomful of Chinese students about my parents' divorce and the way my dog jumps off our dock in order to illustrate the American family. I allowed myself to look very stupid in front of a great number of vendors as I used my very poor Chinese language skills to fight for a better price. And eventually, I got better at it and paid far less. Chinese people were watching me, but they weren't watching to be critical of my appearance or taste in music. Once I figured out

that it didn't matter that I was wearing my overalls for the third day in a row, that I didn't smell like a beauty magazine, and that I was listening to Celine Dion and singing the *Titanic* song with great emotion, I had fun. I opened my eyes to a whole new world and a whole new attitude. Not only could I let go of my inhibitions against physical contact, but suddenly I could wear dirty clothes with abandon and sing show tunes from my balcony.

Until my first *huoguo*—hotpot—in early September, my China experience had been fairly Western and up to the First World standards to which I was accustomed. Ryan and Daman, two of the men in my group, met Leann, Bessie, Olive, Lily and Aileen, five 20-year-old Chinese girls who were studying to be tour guides, on the soccer fields after our first day of classes. The next day, these five Chinese girls met six of us Americans at our dorm—the *waiiban*. We knew nothing of their plans, except that they promised to introduce us to *huoguo*, a Chinese dish somewhat akin to our fondue: water filled with spices (half hot and half not) boils chunks of raw meat, vegetables, and bean curd over a propane fire. We followed them across our new campus, walked first through the part of campus I had toured the day before and then off campus eventually, to a part of Beibei I have never been to since. The streets, unlike the cobblestoned downtown, were chalky and cracked. There was a stale odor to the hot Chongqing air, and the haze I was to grow accustomed to later in the semester seemed unnatural and mysterious. Groups of old people sat around small square tables outside of shops and homes playing *ma jiang* and drinking tea. Occasionally someone would point at us, and small children, clad in blue corduroy jumpers and red leather Mary Janes, would shout a daring “hello” to us, scrambling behind their mothers before we could smile and return their greeting with a

poorly-said *ni hao*. Motorcycle taxis, which were to become one of my favorite modes of transportation in Beibei, zoomed by. I walked with Aileen, who told me about her family in Chongqing and explained that you have to leave the meat in the hotpot for a long time to make sure it cooks all the way through. As we walked she looped her arm through mine.

I was very excited to have a Chinese friend, but I wasn't used to the hand holding and physical contact. Chinese are, in general, less inhibited about physical contact with friends of the same sex, and I found myself walking hand in hand or arm in arm with whatever Chinese friend I was with whenever we went anywhere together. When these same girls took us to a campus dance hall the weekend after this dinner, I learned how to waltz with girls. As far as I know, this tendency for physical contact with friends doesn't extend to male-female friendships, but Chinese men are more likely to touch each other than are American men. Once when I was at a talent show on campus there were more people than seats, but in several seats sat two men. In four and a half months in China I grew so used to walking arm in arm that I introduced the practice to my roommates in the US. It's pretty practical, really, especially during icy Minnesota winters.

We arrived at the restaurant after twists and turns that took us past two women fighting and tearing each other's clothes off and through a market full of dripping pig hearts and pasty chicken carcasses.

The eleven of us sat at two wobbling wooden tables with metal legs. Each table had a hole in its center and a propane tank under it that fueled the fire that cooked the *huoguo*. While our new Chinese friends haggled over the price with the restaurant's *lao ban*, we puzzled over the toilet paper rolls sheathed in cartoon-adorned primary-color

plastic holders that served as napkins throughout China. The girls sat down and the food and tableware started arriving. First the *beizi*, explained Lily: the glasses. Then the *kuaizi*: the chopsticks. Then the *wan* full of *mi fan*: the bowls of rice. Then small servings of oil and spice. The *lao ban* brought *pings* of *ke le*, *xue bi*, *pi jiu* and *xue*: bottles of Coke, Sprite, beer and water. Plates of *cai*: vegetables like cauliflower, bean sprouts, potatoes, lotus root, cabbage and pea pods. Then the *rou*: pork, beef and chicken. Finally, the *lao ban* brought noodles, whole fish and plates of things I did not recognize.

Nearby five young men played loud drinking games akin to American paper, rock scissors. Bessie asked for a distinction in the pronunciation of “night” and “light. Leann showed the boys at her end of the table how she could remove the top of a beer bottle with her teeth. Aileen filled our *huoguo* pot with the vegetables, meat, noodles, and things I did not recognize.

Although I didn’t know it at the time, that first *huoguo* full of eel, pig brain, ox intestine, chicken, cauliflower, tofu skin, and the vocal cords of ducks was a turning point in my life. It was the first step in a journey that is making it impossible for me to blindly and blithely pursue the American Dream. I don’t know how to be content with a well-paying job and a picket fence in the US when there is so much more to the world than what lies under the Star Spangled Banner. I grew up middle class in a Midwestern town and have never experienced hunger, oppression, or significant physical pain. Now I’ve been to China and seen shrunken old men carrying live, full-grown pigs in baskets balanced on bamboo shoulder poles. I saw the emaciated look still in my literature professor’s eyes from his time in the countryside during China’s Cultural Revolution,

when he, an intellectual, was to learn to be more like a peasant and less like the bourgeois intellectuals whom Mao feared.

The biggest change China worked in me was the way it complicated my entire worldview. One of the more common adjectives used to describe Chinese life is “simple.” I still haven’t figured out exactly what that means. There are parts of Chinese daily life that seem to move a little more slowly—there is an extra-long lunch hour built in to every day to accommodate a nap or rest or some other refreshing activity—but I think this is one of the ways we romanticize Chinese culture. It seems slower and simpler to us on the surface, but when I think about it, it doesn’t seem like there’s anything simple about a country with a five thousand-year history and a tradition of hierarchy based on age, profession, social status, and gender. When I was in China I realized that nothing about China was as simple and straightforward as it seemed and that snap judgements were bound to be wrong.

Every once in a while when I was walking by myself or drifting to sleep in China, I would realize all over again that “Oh, my God. I’m in *China*.” I would repeat it over and over to myself, trying to reconcile the stereotypes of that country that I had eaten for the first twenty years of my life with the reality I was living. Sometimes I wondered how I got there but then decided it didn’t matter at all. It was exciting to say hello to people in Chinese, to eat with chopsticks, to have small triumphs asking for and getting a different bus or a better price. I climbed the Great Wall of China and saw the Potala Palace from my Lhasa hotel room. I ate pig brain and didn’t vomit. I held my friend’s hand and walked with arms linked in friendship. I peed standing up with a pig in the next stall.

Sarah Mechtenberg and I spent Christmas Eve on an overnight train between the cities of Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, and Panzhihua, a stopping point for folks on their way to towns in Yunnan province. We had just returned from Tibet, where we had traveled with thirteen other people from our group, and now it was just the two of us. On top of missing our friends and family in the States and the Chinese friends we had left ten days earlier, we missed the American friends who had traveled to other parts of China. We had traveled, studied, and lived with an amazing group of people, many of whom had come to mean so much in each of our lives. There was nothing special or touching about being on the train, and we were desperate to get ourselves out of our homesick slump. We thought it would be fun to read parts of our journals out loud to each other—to relive some of the funny parts of the trip and to laugh at what we had been afraid of in September. We did laugh for a while but soon started to cry as we got into entries about the beginning of the program, when everything was new and we had all our opportunities in front of us, about the times we felt left out or out of place, about saying goodbye to our Chinese friends. In the middle of that dark and crowded train I really thing we created something sacred. I have happier Christmas memories, but I don't think I have any that tug more at my heart or make me feel any warmer. What stands out most to me is one of Sarah's entries about a comment someone made to her about how he never thought she was so outgoing and uninhibited when he knew her at St. Ben's. She was frustrated because she felt so natural, and wrote, "Why do I feel and act more like myself when I'm in China?" It has taken me a while to realize that I, too, became more myself in China.

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